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OR, MOVE-ON MIKE'S GRAND CATCH.

BY JO PIERCE,
AUTHOR OF "SPICY JIM," "PAVEMENT PETE,"
"TARTAR TIM," "WRESTLING REX," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BANISHED FROM HOME.

COLONEL ANDREW FENTON brought his hand down forcibly on the table beside him.

"No, sir!" he exclaimed. "From this hour you are no son of mine!"

"And that means—"

"That you leave my house at once; that your connection with my office and business ceases now; that in all ways you will have to look out for yourself, henceforth!"

"I'VE GOT TER STOP PETER," CRIED THE IMPRISONED GAMIN, "OR THIS PRISON WILL HOLD ME TIGHT."

Randolph Fenton's face changed color as he gazed at his indignant father. The interview had been long and stormy, but, indignant as the colonel was, his son had not looked for an ultimatum as radical as this. It alarmed him; it disheartened him.

"But, father," he remonstrated, "if you carry out your threat you will punish an innocent person."

"Prove it!"

"How can I?"

"The question is timely!" Colonel Fenton retorted, with sarcasm.

Randolph's figure became more erect, and his eyes flashed with spirit.

"You mean that innocence cannot be established where guilt exists, but your decision to condemn me cannot change the facts. I rest upon the assertion that—I am innocent!"

The father's face softened for a moment.

"Then, how has the damage been done? How have secrets gone outside our office which were known only to you and me?"

"I have told you, sir, that I don't know. More than that, I have racked my brain to get even a theory, and failed."

"It may not be the only failure. I have lost a hundred thousand dollars in the last six months, simply because some one has constantly undermined me. If I had a purchase arranged, some one bought ahead of me; if I contemplated a sale, knowing it policy to sell, all efforts to save myself from loss were frustrated by some one who had heard of my secrets. In brief, my business has gone to the dogs, and some one else has made the profits I ought to have made."

"And now you suspect me! Does not my success depend upon yours?"

"It may, or may not. If you have reaped the fruit of treachery you have made more in six months than you could have made in years, by acting honorably."

"Still suspicious!"

"Suspicious? No! I am convinced! Before I spoke a word to you I had positively decided that you were guilty—"

"You admit, then, that you condemned me unheard?"

"Unheard? You insult me, boy!" the colonel cried. "I tried to prove your innocence, myself, at first. I hired the keenest, most honorable of detectives to ferret out the mystery. They discovered that certain men had injured me financially, by getting ahead of me in unknown ways, and that you kept the company of these men. Even then I would not believe; I told them I would see for myself; I did see. I saw you with the men who had engineered the deals against me—the open agents of my secret foes."

"What of it? Are the aforesaid agents not men of upright character and highly respected?"

"They have been—"

"Are they not now?"

"I can bring no charge against them."

"Yet you condemn me for being in their company! And I was there only because they were business men. There was no significance in my call."

"There is significance in the way that secrets known only to me and you have gone out of our office, and enabled the before-mentioned agents to make a pile of money for some one at my expense!"

Randolph stood silent, too proud to say more. His father regarded him curiously, but with unabated sternness.

"You say you cannot prove your innocence?"

"I said so."

"You are guilty!"

"Have it as you will, sir!"

"I trust you are ready to leave my house?"

"I am, sir!"

Randolph left the parlor with a proud and indignant air. His hand was on the knob of the street door when his father, who had followed, interposed:

"You forget your trunk and personal property."

Randolph turned quickly.

"I forget nothing, sir!"

"You had better do your own packing."

"I have no packing to do; no trunk to carry. You say I am no longer your son, and have ordered me from your house. I go, Mr. Fenton, but not with the help of your expressman. I take no trunk, no personal property; nothing save the clothes I have upon my back, and an unblemished character. If I am to be a beggar, I will not be above my class!"

Once more turning the young man went quickly out of the house, and down the street. Once, Colonel Fenton made a motion to call him back, but checked the paternal impulse. Instead, he

returned to the parlor, sunk into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Heaven help me!" he murmured; "I have torn my heart-strings asunder!" Then, after a pause, he added in a husky voice: "And Heaven help the boy I have loved so well!"

Meanwhile, Randolph was still walking. He walked a long while, heedless of the direction he took, and conscious only of the indignation surging in his mind. He was twenty-four years old, and had been, until the last hour, a youth who hoped to achieve much among his fellow-men by earnest devotion to business. Now, all was changed; he was an outcast; he had been sent adrift with a father's condemnation upon him, and he smarted under the mental lash.

The gathering shades of night finally aroused him from abstraction, and brought him back to the realities of life, but when he looked around he failed to recognize his whereabouts.

He was on a street, narrow, unprepossessing and grim. Ancient old houses, low and time-stained, stared upon him, and numerous dirty children played in the dirty street.

Truly, he was in a quarter very different from that where stood his father's aristocratic dwelling.

The puzzled look was still on his face when a small sharply-pitched voice sounded near him:

"Lost anything, mister?"

Randolph turned and saw a ragged boy of about fourteen years.

"Nothing but myself," he answered.

"Is it wu'th payin' a reward fur?"

"No!" young Fenton answered, with emphasis.

"Rewards are never paid for tramps."

"Not unless they're wanted in prison."

Randolph was turning to leave the young questioner, but the last remark checked his departure. He looked more attentively at his companion.

The latter was evidently indigenous to the quarter where Randolph found him, and, like the dim old houses, subject to the sovereign rule of King Poverty. The boy wore the king's livery—the garments on his person, originally of the cheapest kind, were old and shabby. Divers smears of dirt across his face were not necessarily of the King Poverty livery, but the boy had them. Rags nor dirt, however, had been able to crush a naturally buoyant disposition; it gleamed in his bright, shrewd face, and twinkled in his big, steady eyes.

"Who are you?" Fenton asked.

"Mosquito Jack!"

"What?"

"Mosquito Jack, the Hustler Gamin."

"You've adopted an odd name."

"Didn't 'dopt it. Name was given me at baptism. You see, my parients couldn't 'gree on my classic appellation. My dad, he wanted ter call me George Washin'ton Adams Jefferson Jackson—an' some more on 'em, which I disremember; while my marm was dead set on hevin' me called Clarence Percy Claude Jasper Oscar Fitz-noodle—poaty fair kind o' given names, only a leetle elongated in parts; an' my gran'-marm said it must be Hezekiah Eliphalet Zachariah; an' they wuz hevin' it hot w'en a muskeeter lit on my nose an' bit me so I yelled like p'izen. That settled it, an' I was christened Mosquito Jack right off, smack!"

The boy made this remarkable statement with great gravity of countenance, but the twinkle in his bright eyes showed he enjoyed his joke.

"Such a peculiar occurrence is equaled only by your veracity as a chronicler. Do you live near here?"

"Right there! Want ter hire a room?"

Randolph had been talking because he had nothing else to do, but the practical question turned his thoughts into the same channel. He was homeless and must sleep somewhere. If he had been left to himself he would, of course, have gone to a hotel, but the inquiry came at a moment when he was open to impressions.

He looked more critically at the dingy old house. Why should he not turn to a shelter of the kind at once? Those who lived there were poor; so was he. Some had no money, probably; he had but little. Perhaps they had employment; he had none.

Why not sink to his new level, at once?

"Who keeps the house?"

"My a'nt, Mrs. Sariah Brown."

"Is it an honest place?"

"None honest."

"I'll go in and see your aunt."

"Foller on!"

For a moment Mosquito Jack had looked surprised, but the expression soon disappeared. He crossed the street. Reaching the curbstone, he looked around, and, seeing Randolph at his

heels, again looked surprised. In point of fact he had not expected the stylish-looking young man to follow him; he had regarded the latter's words as no more than a joke; and when he noticed Randolph's decided air, he gave evidences of disapproval which the young man would have noticed under some circumstances.

At the threshold the guide actually stopped, but Randolph spoke curtly:

"Go on!"

Mosquito Jack went. He led the way to a seedy parlor, and then summoned Mrs. Sarah Brown. She proved to be a thin woman, much given to sighing, but seemed too weak of nature to be vicious. That she had an eye to business was shown by the manner in which, despite several wandering glances at the applicant's clothing, she let him a room.

It was high in the house, and the plainest of rooms; it was scantily furnished and equipped with a ragged carpet; but the price was moderate, and he engaged it with all the philosophy possible.

Mrs. Brown left him, but he detained Mosquito Jack, and conversed with that eccentric person until they were quite well acquainted. Jack finally pleaded work to attend to, and Randolph was alone. Later, he noticed that there was no key in the door of his room, and as such a thing seemed very essential, he descended to interview Mrs. Brown.

On reaching the hall he heard her voice in the parlor and entered. She and another woman were its only occupants.

"Mrs. Brown," he began, "I fail to find—"

The second woman, toward whom he had hardly glanced, sprung to her feet with a cry, and, a moment later, her arms were clasped around Randolph's neck.

CHAPTER II.

SOMEBODY'S MISTAKE.

"BERTRAM! Oh! thank Providence I again see you!" were the words which rung in Randolph's startled ears.

He struggled stoutly to cast off the encircling arms but in vain. The woman clung to him and murmured words of joy and tenderness, real or feigned, while he writhed about in alarm.

He had the suspicion which those of the higher classes often feel for the habitations of the lowly born, and had wondered before leaving his room whether it would prove that he was in a den of thieves. Now, the tenacious hold of the woman's arms led him to fear attack from some more dangerous foe, and he broke away as soon as possible.

"What in the world do you mean?" he cried, with mixed indignation and suspicion.

"Should say she meant ter rumple yer shirt-collar, by Ebenezer!" quoth Mosquito Jack, who had just entered the room.

"Bertram, is it thus you receive me?" demanded the strange woman, sadly.

"Should remark that the *thussness* o' the reception was on t'other foot!" commented Jack.

"My name is not Bertram," sharply answered Randolph.

"I have long doubted that, myself."

"Your doubts are well founded."

"At least, I hope I have no cause to doubt you!"

"What am I to you, anyhow?"

"My husband!"

"Your husband?"

"Cricketty-jim!"

The last unique expression was from irrepressible Jack, but Randolph looked only at the woman. He saw she was young and far from ill-looking, but his opinion of her was decidedly below par.

"So you are a blackmailer!" he exclaimed.

"Bertram! how can you?"

With this reply, and it was really pathetic, the young woman burst into tears. If they were feigned, the acting was well done.

"You wrong Mrs. Dalton, sir," interposed the landlady, with dignity. "I don't understand this scene, but if you think her capable of injuring you, or any one else, you are mistaken."

"At any rate, I am not Bertram, nor am I her husband—I believe that is what she said."

The young woman's head was lifted.

"Do you deny that we were married?"

"I do, emphatically; I never saw you before."

"I suppose you never even heard of Lena Curtis?"

"I never did."

"My worst fears are realized!"

"Your fears I know nothing about, but I don't stand between you and them. If you are acting a part, I assure you it will avail you nothing; if you are laboring under a genuine

mistake, take my word when I say I am not this Bertram of whom you speak."

Randolph's manner had grown less aggressive. The young woman gave every evidence of real grief—even of sincerity—and he regarded her more critically than before. She had a kind of delicate comeliness which approached to beauty, but was like that of one who had seen more than her share of sorrow.

"This thing should be cleared up!" asserted Mosquito Jack, thrusting his unclean hands deep into his pockets and looking wise. "Marriage ain't no common thing; it's an onspeakable catastrophe; a gnawin' distemper o' the heart; a calamity o' mustangdonic proportions. It takes at least two ter git married, an' sometimes all o' the wife's relations wants a voice in the bill o' fair. Discords, dislocations an' divorces then folloer. Let us look inter this kerlamity joodicially?"

The speaker turned gravely to Randolph:

"Mrs. Lena Dalton here is a single married woman, an' the only husband she's got she ain't got. He's skipped an' left her in the soup, but she ain't 'in it,' an' he's 'out o' sight.' She thinks you married her; you think not. You may both be wrong. Mebbe she married you, but you didn't marry her. Kin that be it?"

Light and careless as the self-styled Hustler Gamin's remarks were, they were not without good effect. He covered a pause which enabled Lena to dry her tears in a measure, while Randolph fully decided that he was not among persons whose object was blackmail.

Of course he was not then a fit subject for such a scheme, but his expensive clothing gave a wrong idea of his financial means.

"Let us settle this affair," he continued, more amiably. "I don't think we need to quarrel. Do you still think that I look like your husband?"

"You are my husband; you are Bertram Dalton!" Lena insisted, but in a hopeless way.

Randolph made a deprecating gesture.

"Will you kindly tell me your story?"

She told it—a story told many times, with but slight variations.

She had been a shop-girl. She met a young man who was well-dressed, handsome, aristocratic and, judging by the money he spent, rich. He saw and admired her; made her acquaintance; courted and married her. He took her from the shop, freed her from all labor, hired comfortable rooms, and was very attentive for a year. He had never been at home—at her home—regularly, but accounted for his absence at various times by saying he was a commercial traveler.

Finally, he disappeared altogether. He left with her two hundred dollars, and a note which stated that he was going to Europe, and she would never see him again.

She never had seen him again—"until now," she added, looking at Randolph.

"You still insist that I am he?"

"What else can you expect?"

"Naturally, I could not expect anything else; this is the one thing not to be expected. It is a case of mistaken identity, for I never saw you before, as I have stated."

Lena looked at him with moistened eyes and saddened face, and then sighed. She was not a determined woman, and, having previously decided that Bertram Dalton had deserted her permanently, and would never live with her again, she was ready to accept a refusal now—not willingly, but as a matter of necessity.

Nevertheless, her faith that Randolph Fenton was Dalton remained unshaken.

Mosquito Jack gave his head a wise nod.

"Can't you prove an *alibi*, mister?" he asked.

"An *alibi*?" repeated Randolph, impulsively.

"Certainly! I can show just where I was all the time you knew Dalton, and prove that I was elsewhere—"

He stopped short. He was no longer Randolph Fenton, with rich and highly-respectable relatives to certify to his good character. By whom could he prove what he alleged? Only the members of his father's household could establish the fact that he had always been at home of nights, and, as he felt then, he would sooner go to prison than call on his father for help.

He had given his name to Mrs. Brown as Peter Woods, and Peter Woods he must remain.

"Let's go right over and see yer *alibites*," advised the practical Hustler Gamin.

Randolph could not help being confused, and each of the trio noticed it. Naturally, too, they ascribed his confusion to conscious guilt.

"There is no haste," he observed, awkwardly.

"I will, in due time, establish all I assert."

Lena regarded him in the same mournful manner, a fact that appealed to his sympathies strongly.

"I suppose you feel hurt," he pursued, "but I wish to disabuse your mind of the idea that you are receiving fresh wrong from your husband. Whatever he has done, he does not enter into this scene; I am not he."

"She don't b'lieve you, mister," remarked Jack.

"For her sake, I wish she could."

"What erbout *your* sake?"

"I repeat, I can readily prove that I am not Dalton."

"Wives do git mixed now an' then," declared Jack, philosophically. "Our courts are jest jammed with cases where women claim men who don't want ter share their matromonial affections. I allow it must be that gals ain't critikel enough when they git married; they should take a good, square look at their husbands, so's ter know 'em next time. Mebbe a better way would be for each gal ter brand a private mark on her hubby, as the Texas cattle-owners do on their steers. 'Twould be a good idee, I allow!"

The Hustler Gamin looked thoughtfully at the ceiling, and then emphatically added:

"'Twould, by Ebenezer!"

"Mrs. Dalton," continued Randolph, touched by her patience, "you can rely upon me to help you all I can. I wish you would get rid of the idea that I am a heartless knave, and regard me as an honest man who is willing to help, not injure you."

It was asking a good deal of her, when her faith in her own judgment was so strong, and it was but natural that her manner remained the same as before.

"Mr. Woods," said Mrs. Brown, "I'll tell you how you can settle this."

"How?"

"Take her to your home, and let your parents testify that you are not, cannot have been, this Bertram Dalton."

Randolph hesitated.

"I have no home."

"Parents?"

"No!" he answered, bitterly.

"You hesitate and are confused. Why is this, if you are telling the whole truth?"

"I have not advertised to tell all my private affairs; I simply say I can prove I'm not Dalton."

"By whom?"

"That you will learn when I see fit to prove it!"

Randolph, still smarting under his own misfortunes of the day, was not in a mood to be cross-questioned so suspiciously, and the manner of his answer was quite as ungracious as his words. Mrs. Brown was not a resolute or vixenish woman, but she had seen a good deal of the dark side of life; enough so she had little or no faith in mankind. As a result, she now believed Randolph guilty, and, on receiving his last answer, turned to Lena and nodded knowingly.

The young man saw this movement, and felt freshly aggrieved. He was going out of his way to offer aid to Lena, and was only met with doubts. He saw the folly of continuing the conversation.

"Mrs. Brown, the room of my door has no key," he remarked, abruptly. "If you will give me one, I will return there."

The key was handed over at once.

"Mrs. Dalton, if you will refrain from spreading this absurd rumor about me, you can rely upon me to help you to the extent of my ability."

Adding these words, Randolph turned and went up-stairs. He was about to close the door of his room when he saw Mosquito Jack in the way. The youth had softly followed.

"Ef you don't mind, mister," he remarked, "I'll come in an' talk politics an' policy with yer."

Company would keep Randolph's mind partially from his home troubles, and he allowed Jack to enter.

"Women is queer critters!" asserted the Hustler Gamin, gravely. "Is this common?"

"What?"

"Fer lonely, lovely an' lorn maidens ter claim you fer a cash-pervider."

"You mention cash. Do you think this Mrs. Dalton is a blackmailer?"

"Bless your dear heart, mister, no! Lena ain't on the make. There's Cheslington dead gone on her, an' a-sighin' like a bellus fer her, an' a-beseechin' ter love him; but she won't even say 'Boo!' ter him."

"Who is he?"

"Mister, I ain't a mind-reader, an' ef I wuz,

his mind might not make Sunday-school peroo-sin' matter. Everard is a gay young buck who dresses like a royal dook o' London, an' pays his bills. That's all my respectable aunt, Sariah Brown, widder, dares ter ask him. Ketch on?"

"I infer that he's a man about town who—"

"I'm *that*, too, but I don't find the Uncle Sam dollars that Everard does. Man about town! Say, I kin show you ez much o' New York as any guide-book kin tell. Want ter be piloted 'round?"

The boy spoke eagerly, and Randolph was not at a loss to understand that he wished to earn a dollar.

"I know too much of New York, already," was the bitterly-spoken answer.

"Show! Go way! Why, it's the boss city o' the world!"

"Granted!—for those in luck."

"That's why it suits me wall!" quoth Jack, with a humorous smile.

This new acquaintance amused Randolph.

"Do you suppose you could show me anything new?"

"Do I? Wal, I should exclaim, Ebenezer! What shall it be? I hev it! All young bloods like ter specerlate; I kin show you a broker's orifice in a garret, where deeds are done that rattle the king's o' Wall street!"

CHAPTER III.

RANDOLPH GETS INTO HARD COMPANY.

MOSQUITO JACK had unconsciously touched a tender spot when he alluded to speculation, and Randolph was about to stop him short, but the conclusion of the sentence was so unexpected that the Fenton outcast changed his mind.

"A broker's office in a garret?" he repeated.

"Jes' so."

"Where?"

"Ob! down yonder."

"Why is it in a garret?"

"Owls an' foxes operate mostly at night, but they git more chickens than hawks. Dark deeds need dark nights!"

"Don't speak in metaphors. You have interested me, and I would like to know more about this place. 'Down yonder' is very indefinite, but I infer that the place is far from Wall street and financial centers. Why is this? Who runs it? What is there irregular about their mode of doing business?"

"I kinder stagger under the weight o' your questions, but I never lose my feet. As a dictionary I ain't much, as a guide, I am the best sence Daniel Boone. Ef you want ter see the place, ante up one dollar, coin o' the realm, an' foller where I lead."

"But I want to know more of this place—"

"Can't tell yer nothin'; a painful impediment in my ears prevents me from talkin' much; but ef you want ter see, my ears won't interfere with yer eyesight—or ef they do, I'll pin 'em back out o' yer way."

"But how can we gain access to a place where all is done on the quiet?"

"There's a club-room where all kin go in ef they hev' the password, an' the broker's office is nigh it. That's all I kin tell."

That was all Randolph learned, at any rate, for Jack proved to be too obdurate to yield to persuasions. He had interested his companion, however, and Fenton determined to make the venture. That it was a venture he was well aware—it might be one of great danger—but he was accustomed to night-life in New York, felt able to care for himself, and had been rendered reckless enough by Colonel Fenton's treatment to dare dangers he would have avoided at any other time.

"I'll go," he announced.

"You don't want ter wear them clo'se, mister. You are goin' where poverty rubs shoulders with itself, but not with purple an' fine linen. You must hev' some old clo'se."

Here was a rock of difficulty, for Randolph had only the suit upon his back, but the self-styled Hustler Gamin was equal to the emergency. There was a store near at hand where a suit could be had for a very few dollars. If Randolph went, he must purchase.

Bitter and not a little discouraged, Fenton had a vague idea of blossoming out as a coal-heaver, street-laborer, or something of the sort. Why not find his level at once?

He went out with Jack and purchased a suit at a price he considered almost a mere nothing. True, the garments were very coarse, and did not promise to endure hard service well, but he thought them just suited to his new level.

When he had put them on even Mosquito Jack smiled gravely.

"Wouldn't know ye, by Ebenezer! You look

twice as big as you did. They must be easy, fer they don't seem ter touch ye now'ers but on the shoulders. Still, they're better than a blanket, fer they've got legs an' arms."

Thus eccentrically equipped, Randolph followed Jack out of the house.

As they went down the ill-kept, poorly-lighted street, he wavered for a moment. Reckless as he felt, he realized that it was an act of folly to go with a stranger into a place of which he knew nothing. It might be a resort of thieves, and Jack might be their decoy.

He looked sharply at the boy as they passed a street-lamp. His face was keen and bright, as well as somewhat mischievous, but good nature and humor lurked in the big eyes and the quaint mouth.

"If he isn't honest," thought Fenton, "Nature has put the wrong brand on him. I'll see the adventure out."

They reached a big, rambling old brick building. The lower floor was devoted to business purposes, but the guide led the way up-stairs, and to a door, the location of which he certainly knew well.

"Look keener, innocent an' tough!" directed Jack, turning his head for a moment; then he threw open the door.

The club-room lay before Randolph. Jack was going ahead in a free-and-easy manner, and despite his former intimation, there was no one to remonstrate against it. Peace and good will seemed to prevail, and there was no visible arrangement for preventing strangers from entering, though Randolph took it for granted that he might have been stopped had it not been for Jack's presence.

He saw a long room, with a second room beyond it, the two being connected by big sliding-doors. A cheap carpet was on the floor; cheap pictures were on the wall; cheap furniture completed the furnishing.

The room was well filled, but not by honest workmen, Randolph thought. The air was blue with tobacco-smoke, and several pitchers of beer sat on the table. Reading matter was there, too, but mostly in the shape of so-called sporting-papers, gaudy with sensational illustrations.

But it was to the men that Randolph looked mostly—men and boys; for half of the crowd were less than twenty-one, and some not over fifteen. He at once decided that, though they might not be criminals, they were not of the stuff of which good citizens are made.

Avoiding the long table, the guide conducted Randolph to a small table at one side, where only one man was sitting.

"Hullo, Gulliver!" quoth the solitary man, huskily.

"Hullo, Flippy Jim!" returned Jack, calmly.

"How's yer muscle?"

"So-so."

"Who's yer frien'?"

"Peter Woods."

"Intrerdue me."

"Peter, turn the axles o' yer eyes this way. Look at Mr. Flippy Jim, street delegate o' this sassiety."

Jack performed the introduction gravely, and Randolph, much to his disgust, had to acknowledge the ceremony. Of all the persons present Flippy Jim was the worst looking. He was very ragged, and his supply of dirt put his rags to the blush. He had a red face, in the middle of which was a nose yet higher colored; and several sizes too large. In brief, he was a typical bum.

"Don't remember seein' you here afore," observed Mr. Flippy Jim, "but then, I don't know all o' the boys. Yer see, I'm a bit exclusive, an' don't mix with Tom, Dick an' Harry. I come o' gentle blood, sirs."

The speaker tried to straighten up with pride, but only brought on a fit of drunken coughing.

"He's N. G.!" tersely whispered Jack to Randolph.

"Gentle blood," repeated Jim, when he recovered his breath. "My father was own cousin ter Queen Vic, an' my mother was a Rooshan duke—I mean, princess. I move in 'way-up sassiety, here. You know Michael O'Dowley?"

"Sartain," replied Jack. "He's the copper on this beat."

"Zactly. Wal, Mike—Move-on Mike, we call him—has engaged me ter help him run this ward, an' I'm goin' ter do it. I know Everard Cheslington, too, an' the firm o' Smythe & Johnson."

"They sells pools on the races," Jack explained, to Randolph, pointing toward the rear.

"Great place in thar!" asserted Flippy Jim, reeling in his chair. "Pool-sellin', stock-jobbin'—

—don't know what they don't do there; but it's all on the square."

Randolph was not pleased with Jim; in fact, he was one of the most offensive wretches the young man had ever seen, monument of rags, dirt and drunkenness that he was. Wishing to get rid of him, the former turned to Mosquito Jack.

"Suppose we see the other place, now?"

"Wot place?"

"The one you were to show; the alleged banking office," explained Randolph, lowering his voice.

"Don't think we kin get in."

"Why not?"

"Tain't open ter the public."

"But you promised to show it to me."

"Not the inside!"

"What do you suppose I care for the outside? Come! I've paid my money, and I want you to keep your word. I trust you have not played a trick on me?"

"My frien'," gravely answered the Hustler Gamin, "I can't do wot I can't do. I didn't agree ter show you the carpet in that office, an' let you set in the big arm-chair, fer there may be no arm-chair there, an' I never seen the carpet, myself. You see that office is a very private place, an' unless a feller is in the swim, he must be satisfied ter look at the knob on the door!"

"The long and short of it is you have deceived me!"

Randolph was angry, and strongly tempted to rise and leave Jack to his chosen company, but that young citizen, with unfailing good-humor, remonstrated:

"Now, don't talk that way; you just my feelin's. I never agreed ter show ye the inside, an' didn't know as you wanted ter see it. I kin show ye the door, an' that's all I know anything about. What's done inside is done right sly an' secret. I'm sorry ef I've raised false hopes, or disa'p'inted ye; an' as fer deceivin' on ye, why, I'll hand yer money right back ef you feel I ain't acted on the square."

This statement was so frankly made that Mosquito Jack recovered his lost place in Randolph's esteem.

"Never mind the money, but if you can give me insight to the workings of that banking office, so called, do not fail to do it."

"That sleek-lookin' feller over there is Johnson, the pool-seller, an' he's really in cahoots with Cheslington. I ain't no doubt. Hullo! there's Ches, now!"

A flashily-dressed man passed them, joined Johnson, and was soon shaking hands with him.

"Come into the office," requested Cheslington, in a tone not so low but that it reached Randolph's ears. "I've got a new pointer on that down-town speculator, and we'll make a howl at his expense to-morrow!"

They went on. Randolph turned to his guide and exclaimed:

"Jack, I must see the inside of that office!"

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF A SECRET.

RANDOLPH was excited. He was in just the right mood to receive impressions, and, with his curiosity already aroused by the alleged secrecy attending this strangely situated "office," he had been strongly moved by Cheslington's last words:

"I've got a new pointer on that down-town speculator, and we'll make a haul at his expense to-morrow!"

Significant words, when the condition of Colonel Fenton's business house was considered. Randolph was not a person by any means wild and visionary, but an earnest desire to investigate this matter had seized upon him.

Cheslington, he had read at a glance. Flashy as the average sporting-man usually was, he had that in his facial expression which told of a man who lived by his wits, and cared not whether his ways were those of honor.

"Sh!" returned Mosquito Jack, to this last assertion. "Don't put too much hydraulic force inter yer voice."

The Hustler Gamin looked around apprehensively, but Flippy Jim was nodding over an empty beer-glass, and the rest of the frequenters of the place seemed unconscious of the group by the little table.

"This ain't a Sunday-school meetin'-house," added Jack, in a low voice. "There's some here who are rank p'izan, an' would jest as soon kerwallow us as not. Sing low while we're here!"

"I want to know more about those men."

"We'll fix it, ef possible, but ef these tiger-lamps git on ter the fact we're mousin' arter secrets, we'll go out o' here so fast you could play a game o' checkers on our coat-tails."

"I am prepared to believe all you assert, and will be duly cautious. But I want information, and am willing to pay for it."

"Cheslington an' Johnson hev locked the office door."

"So I noticed."

"Wal, we're shut out."

"But can't we work some scheme to listen at some other point? I see you have no great amount of love for this gang, and I dare say you are not averse to earning five dollars."

"My soul ain't bound up in money," Jack retorted, "but I'm willin' ter give a pard a lift when I kin. But about this office scheme, I don't see how we kin work the raffle 'bout runnin' a powerful sight o' resk; I don't, by Ebenezer!"

"I'm willing to take the risk, if you are."

The Hustler Gamin looked curiously at Randolph.

"You're in a reckless frame o' mind, an' the frame is like a cat's whiskers, broad enough ter be wisible at long range. Dunno erbout your wild an' resky plans; they might git J. J. Marsh—wich is me—inter the p'izenest diffikilty on record!"

The speaker glanced around at their companions, and Randolph did not fail to appreciate his doubts. Still, he was too eager to drop the point, and he continued to press it. Jack meditated, and finally remarked:

"Ef your life is so much no good that you want ter resk it, mebbe I kin put you in a way ter do it."

"Do so, and you shall be well paid."

"Shoot the pay! Money is all right fer a small job, but when a feller resks his neck, it's pay enough ter git away with it unbroke. See here! Outside the office winder is a fire-escape. Et's a double-header, an' likewise laps the winder o' the wash-room over yender. Now, ef we kin crawl out o' the last winder it'll take us to the fire-escape, an' we kin cavort over an' heark at the office-winder. All this we kin do if—if—if! An' the biggest if o' the whole gang is, if we don't git ketched an' flamdoodled."

It was plain that the Hustler Gamin, bold as he undoubtedly was, did not approve of taking so much risk, but the outcast scion of the house of Fenton was in a mood for any hazardous exploit.

He caught at the chance held out, and urged it so strongly that Jack finally yielded. They arose and passed through the rearmost of the two rooms Randolph had first seen.

As before, they attracted no attention. Rough as the members of the club were—and lawless, too, as many of them were—they were not exclusive. Strangers often came in with members, and the membership was so large that few pretended to know every face that rightfully belonged there.

Back of the second apartment was the wash-room, and this was found untenanted.

Mosquito Jack threw up the window.

"Hustle fer keeps!" he directed, hurriedly.

"Et's now or never, an' ef we git ketched, good-by, Ebenezer!"

Both crawled out on the adjacent floor of the fire-escape, and the window was closed behind them. Randolph looked at the dark expanse beyond.

"It's a ticklish situation," he admitted.

"Ticklish! It's like playin' keards without ary trump. Once let the alarm sound, and where would we be? Kin we fly? Mebbe you kin, but I'm never fly unless nigher sublunatic things; which means, on the ground. Mind you, Mister Peter Woods, ef we git seen, we've got to go down the fire-escape. I'd jest as soon be executed—Hullo! he don't hear me, at all!"

Randolph had gone to the other window, so Jack devoted his time to looking thoughtfully around. Beyond them lay the usual area of back yards, and it was a dark and pokerish place at that hour.

The Hustler Gamin had been through the usual experiences of boys, but a race among the yards with the members of the club in pursuit was something he did not covet.

"They'd jest as soon blaze away at us with revolvers as ter eat hash!" he muttered.

Randolph was at the window. The shade was lowered, but the upper sash was down a little at the top. He moved the shade, and saw Cheslington and Johnson. They were smoking, and, lounging in easy-chairs, seemed to be taking life easy.

"The only trouble with you, Ches," Johnson was saying, "is that you go too light."

"Don't I make a good thing?"

"Yes; but you ought to do better. This snap can't last forever—"

"Right! If we go in too deep it would burst

in no time; they would know the game was being worked, and investigation would lead to discovery. You are too bold, Johnson—reckless, would be a better word."

"The races don't pan out blocks of dust in winter. Your line, though, is even all the year around, and if I were in your place I'd make Wall street shake."

"Look you!" Cheslington returned, with evidences of annoyance, "I am playing a fiddle with one string. Suppose that string breaks, where am I? Again, put it in this light: I depend wholly on the old man and his clients. If I go in too deep I run two risks: first, I may, by making business poor, drive away all the old man's customers; second, I shall surely raise his suspicions so that he will investigate and learn just how we get pointers."

"You may be right."

"I am."

"Do you know how the old man takes it?"

"Word comes to me that he is beginning to hop like a cat on a hot stove. There are losses in his business; there is a constant drain; ventures that ought to succeed well go to the dogs; when he has a pet scheme all ready for action, somebody steps in and plucks the plum just ahead of him—and all this in spite of the iron guard of secrecy he throws about his office."

Johnson laughed.

"Isn't it funny?"

"While the lucre comes our way—yes."

"Keep it up, old chap!"

"The very latest report," added Cheslington, thoughtfully, "is that the old man is beginning to look darkly at his son—his trusted utility man. I've been thinking, this evening, that it wouldn't be odd if the son fell under suspicion and got fired."

Suddenly, the window of the wash-room was flung open. One of the members of the club put out his head, and, naturally, Randolph and Jack became objects very much visible to his eyes.

"Spies!" he cried.

"Scud, mister!" exclaimed the Hustler Gamin, hurriedly, catching at young Fenton's arm.

The latter was all wrapped up in the conversation in the office, which, deeply interesting from the first, had just reached an absorbing point, and the interruption was most unwelcome. He actually hesitated to leave, but the words spoken by the man in the wash-room as an exclamation was repeated as a shout, and Mosquito Jack forcibly pulled his ally back.

"Down the fire-escape, or yer name is Dennis K. Mud!" he declared, sharply.

Randolph needed no more urging. Their arch-enemy was yelling like a trooper, and capture certainly would follow if they lingered. Fenton began to scramble down the small rungs, closely followed by the Hustler Gamin.

He who had given the alarm had ceased to be so noisy, but many voices, in a lower key, were now joined in a chorus, which made a confused humming above them. Questions were asked so freely and rapidly that answers were far from distinct, but, just then, Randolph looked up and saw a man on the fire-escape.

Pursuit was sharp.

Just then, too, Randolph found himself at the end of the iron ladder, though not down to the ground.

"Go on!" urged Mosquito Jack.

"But the ladder stops here."

"We mustn't, ef that does. Drop!"

Fenton hesitated. He had due regard for the solidity of his bones, and did not like to put them to such a test. He looked up anxiously, and saw men peering down all along the flooring above.

"I see him!" cried one.

"Give him a shot!"

Randolph hesitated no longer. Releasing his hold, he moved toward the ground in swift, helpless flight.

CHAPTER V.

THEY FACE THE POLICE.

RANDOLPH'S thoughts at that moment were not so much of the probability of getting injured as of the position he would be placed in if, maimed and captured, he was taken into court and charged with being a common thief, or any other offense which the members of the club saw fit to specify.

Truly, in such a case, his stern father would believe that he had reached the limit of infamy. He alighted heavily and fell to one side; a fortunate occurrence, for Mosquito Jack had come after him recklessly, and might otherwise have struck on him.

For a moment they sprawled on the ground together, but both were soon up.

"Over the fence, mister!" the Hustler Gamin

directed, hurriedly. "We've got ter shake our hoofs!"

"There they be!" declared a voice above. "Shoot them!"

It was the advice of some hot-headed person, and if any one had a revolver, he was prudent enough not to use it.

"Down to the basement door, and we'll run them down yet!" cried a second speaker.

Some of the club-men were not inclined to wait for a way so slow, and as Randolph poised on the top of the first fence, he saw a pursuer dangling from the fire-escape, ready to drop. Randolph went over into the next yard, where agile Jack had already preceded him.

"It's slow work," admitted the boy, "but what bothers us will bother them. Jest keep the pot a-b'ilin'!"

Jack had not exaggerated in regard to the first part of his remark, and as Randolph surveyed the long stretch of yards on both sides of them, his courage wavered.

"How are we to get out of the square, anyhow?" he asked, doubtfully.

"That's an alley over yender. Jest keep up yer grit, an' we'll soon be out o' the woods."

"Unless they make use o' the street, and set a guard at the other end of the alley."

"True, by Ebenezer!"

Jack could not combat the idea of danger thus advanced, and his own spirits were not much lighter than his companion's. Several pursuers were coming after them in the same way they were traveling, but of them there seemed to be little need of fear; everything depended upon whether the alley was guarded.

They approached the deciding point.

"I see no one, from here," observed Randolph breathlessly, as he vaulted over a fence.

"Mebbe they're hidin' inside. But see here, Peter, I know the copper on this beat, an' he's my friend; Move on Mike, they calls him, an' he's a right good chap. Ef there is a ruction I shall act innercent, an' Mike may be good enough ter let us bamboozle him."

"Try it!"

"Here we be!"

They reached the alley, and started through, but had gone only a few steps when they met several men who were moving quite as fast as themselves.

"Here de th'avin' crathures be!" cried a deep, base voice, and a strong hand seized Mosquito Jack.

"Hold up, Mike!" cried the quick-witted boy; "you hev got the wrong pig by the ear. We ain't them; it's only me an' my friend, Pete. We're lookin' fer them."

"Is dat you, Mosquito Jack?"

"Sure!"

"Oh! you've been lookin' for dem?"

"Yes; but never a sign do I see."

"Begorra, Oi'll soon run thim down. Dey don't escape Move-on Moik!"

The patrolman swung his club fiercely and passed the fugitives, intent upon discovery.

"Keep right with Mike," whispered Jack, to Randolph. "We've fooled him, an' now the rest is easy ef we hev decent luck. Mike is a brick!"

Led by the policeman they emerged from the alley, reaching the connecting back-yard just as two of the foremost pursuers vaulted over the fence.

"Here dey are, de tha'ves!" cried the blue-coat. "Begorra! if dis job don't make a sergeant ave me, Oi shall not have me roight!"

He pounced upon the pursuers.

"Yield, in de name ave Liberty an' de Constitution ave de United States, or Oi'll club de socks off ave yez!" he declared, flourishing his club.

"Say, let us alone, will you—"

"Niver a let-alone, will Oi! You'll be marched to de coort an' tried for high tr'ason, begorra!"

"But you've got the wrong men—"

"Wrong nothing! Oi've got you, an' Oi'll hang on in de name ave de State ave N' Yorrak!"

"Say, Mike—"

"Call me Officer O'Dowley, ye thafe!"

"But the thieves are gettin' away all this while. Don't you know me, Mike? I'm Ted Smith."

"Saint Patbrick defend us!"

The officer found he had been shaking and menacing one of his personal acquaintances, and a member of the club. Considerably abashed he released his hold, but his ardor was unchecked.

"We'll foind thim assassins, or tear dis block all to pieces!" he declared.

"They came right to this alley—"

"Dat's phere you's mistaken, for Oi was on de

lookout all de toime. Dey're in hoidin' near here. Scatter, fellers, an' search ivery yard. Dey can't git away!"

Officer O'Dowley's word was law, and the members of the club proceeded to assist him.

"Keep right at Mike's heels!" Jack directed, nudging Randolph. "It's the safest place, now. Ef we stan' right up ter the crib an' take our corn with the rest, nobody won't suspect us."

This was sound advice, and Randolph imitated Jack in adhering to it. The young man was the most unhappy of the whole party. Danger of seizure was not past, and he was chagrined to find himself in such a predicament. He had entertained high ideas of honor, and now only lack of identification stood between him and arrest.

Move-on Mike had zeal, if not the best of judgment, and he beat around the back-yards for a long time, but, finally, he and his assistants were obliged to confess that they were beaten. It was the general opinion that the "thieves" resided in the block, and had re-entered their home by the rear door.

All parties adjourned to the street, where the members of the club bade Mike good-night and returned to their quarters. Only Jack and Randolph were left with the doughty knight of the locust.

"Begorra, Jack," quoth Mike, "Oi shall get no sergeant's berth out ave dat!"

"Better luck, next time, officer."

"Well, Oi should vociferate! Say, such a thing as dat can't occur on my beat an' go unpunished. Oi'll have dem spalpeens or bust! Oi'll cast out a drag-net, an' get dem into it, alive or dead. You hear me?"

"Bet yer life, Mike; and you're solid, too."

"Watch me do it, Jack! Watch de drag-net nab 'em! Oi say, who's yer frien'?"

"Peter Woods, is his name."

"Peter, Oi'm glad ter see yez! Anny toime you want a favor on dis beat, call on me—anything in r'ason, you understand. Oi have no great pull wid de saloons, for Oi'm not a drinkin' man; but Oi sthand by Liberty an' de Consti-tooshun, ivery toime!"

And Move-on Mike waved his club as if it were a battle-ax, with which he intended to decapitate every enemy of his above-mentioned idols.

Jack saw that Randolph wished to get away, so they bade Officer O'Dowley good-night, and walked down the street.

"Quite an eppisod!" remarked the Hustler Gamin, dryly.

"Thank fortune we are out of it in safety!" fervidly added Fenton.

"Do you think yer got paid fer the fire-escape plot?"

"Yes."

"Queer pay!"

"I overheard something in Cheslington's office."

"Oh! did yer? I hope 'twas beneficial, fer I've cast my lot with you, stranger though you be; an' ag'in' them club chaps. Shouldn't want ter find I'd split my chicken-dough all the way round."

"Jack, you have been very useful to me, and I am grateful. What will come of it I don't know, so I can say nothing definite at present. One thing, however, I desire further—absolute silence on your part concerning this adventure."

"Wal, I should echo! Don't s'pose I'm goin' 'round ter advertise the fack that I's one o' the so-called thieves, do yer?"

"No; but I wish you to be very quiet in regard to me. You and I have bec me acquainted in an odd way, but I like your style, and hope it may be kept up. We have a secret in which we are mutually interested, and about which we must say nothing. Further than that, suppose we keep up our alliance? We may be useful to each other?"

"Peter, you're a trump! I couldn't 'a said it better than you's did, an' I admire yer elocushion, grammar, sentiments, eat scattery!—which is Latin fer 'and so forth.' Yes, we'll be pard; an' I hope we'll continner ter hitch hosses wal. I like yer style!"

Jack gravely shook hands with Randolph, and the compact was made.

When near Mrs. Sarah Brown's boarding-house, Jack left his companion to go on an errand, and Fenton entered the house alone, went to his room and retired.

It was long before he slept; his mind was crowded with thoughts which made him nervous and feverish, and he tossed and turned restlessly on the none too comfortable bed.

The day had been the most eventful in his career. For weeks past he and his father had

discussed the mysterious operations against Colonel Fenton, which were so seriously affecting his business, but without gaining any light. Of late the colonel had been curt and ungracious to him, but the son had attributed it to the business troubles, and when, on returning to the family residence that afternoon, he had been accused and driven from home, it was a complete surprise.

What a change a day had brought forth!

He, the elder son of the wealthy speculator, was now a penniless outcast!

He still felt hurt and indignant over Colonel Fenton's treatment, and, with the pride and fire of youth he assured himself that he would never again enter the paternal home. Before going out with Mosquito Jack his plans for the future had oscillated between a career as a street laborer and exile in some foreign country, but other thoughts were now in his mind.

What about Everard Cheslington and his secret business?

Nearly all the conversation overheard while on the fire-escape was stamped on Randolph's mind, and as he reviewed it, it became more and more suggestive. Was Cheslington the man who was bleeding Colonel Fenton so systematically? Viewed on the surface there seemed to be any quantity of evidence, but, to offset this theory, came the question:

What means had Cheslington of knowing anything of the colonel's business? How could he know anything about it, when Fenton had never made any confidant except his now discarded son?

It was a stubborn question, and Randolph's spirits often fell—fell only to rise again. Hope would not yield to logic; it seldom does. So the young man planned on, vowed to follow up the possible clew, prove his own innocence, if possible—prove it only to reject proudly the forgiveness the colonel would tender; and then leave father, friends and home forever, and be a bitter, cynical exile.

At this point, very properly, the schemer fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI. FENTON'S DOUBLE.

RANDOLPH awoke in the morning feeling weary and lame, but consciousness of this fact soon left him. He looked around the barren, poorly-furnished room and contrasted it with the luxurious apartment in his father's house, where he had been the morning before. For a while he was disheartened, but courage soon returned.

"I am young and strong," he thought; "why should I lament lost advantages? Society and nonsense never interested me. I now have a chance to fight the world on my own hook, and I'll try to do it like a man. First of all, I'll try to prove that I'm innocent of the infamous treachery charged against me by my father; then I'll cut loose from the old life and see what Yankee pluck can do for me. My first step, I take it, is properly to introduce my stomach to Mrs. Brown's culinary treasures."

He dressed and went down-stairs.

In the hall he met Lena Dalton, whose face lighted up with a bright smile, and, somewhat to his surprise, she advanced and started to kiss him.

He retreated promptly.

"Pray don't take me for Bertram again!" he remonstrated.

"Don't what?"

"I would suggest that you omit such demonstrations until later."

"But we are alone."

"Are you sure? Bertram may be near."

"He is near!"

"What! have you found your husband? Allow me to congratulate you—"

"How strangely you talk!" Lena exclaimed.

"Are not congratulations in order?"

"I don't know. Seriously, I don't know what to make of your conduct."

"Nor I of yours."

"It is simple in the extreme."

"But after what you said, last night, why should you avoid me so?"

"What did I say last night?"

"That you would acknowledge me as your wife, this morning."

"The dickens I did!"

Randolph stared blankly at Lena. She was as meek, refined and ladylike as ever, while in her face was a curious mixture of hope, doubt and uncertainty.

"Certainly, you did!"

"Are you joking, or deranged?"

Her persistence aroused all of his previous fears of blackmailers, and he used more stern-

ness than ever before. Lena's eyes filled with tears.

"I don't know what to make of you," she sighed.

"If you are more at sea than I, you are a subject of pity. Your assertion that I promised to acknowledge you as my wife cannot be taken lightly, however."

"You made the promise!"

"Let Mrs. Brown and Jack be called. They heard all of our talk—"

"They did not hear a word!"

"No?"

"No! We were wholly alone!"

"Madame, we stood in yonder parlor with Mrs. Brown and Jack—"

"It was not then; it was when I met you upstairs, and you know it. You will yet force me to lose all faith in you, Bertram. It was bad enough to desert me, and then deny me; but when, after you promised to acknowledge me as your wife, as you did when we stood in the hall up-stairs, and then deliberately go back on your word, it is cruelly unjust. It really is, Bertram!"

Randolph gazed blankly at the speaker. If any one's manner ever indicated sincerity and truthfulness hers did, but her claim was astonishing.

"I did not see you in the upper hall," he asserted, as soon as he could recover breath. "Until now, I have not set eyes on you since I parted with you in the parlor, in the presence of Mrs. Brown and Jack!"

"Bertram, have you no regard for the truth?"

Mosquito Jack suddenly made his appearance. "Strikes me you two folks need an umpire, referee, ambassadress, one o' the sev'ral or a good 'eal o' both. Never knowed a fair maiden an' brave man so woundedly at sixes an' sevens in my life. Ter hear yer go on, a feller would think both on ye was the miserablest liars outside o' perlitikel offices—they would, by Ebenezer! Now, as an impartial divorce cricket an' criminal lawyer, I've listened on the sly ter you, an' I mean ter step in an' restore humony an' family infection. I'm a peacemaker, I be, an' my caliber is up'ards o' thirty-two."

The Hustler Gamin had removed his battered hat, and stood before them with an air of profound gravity, such as seemed befitting an adjudicator of matrimonial tangles.

"Let us grapple with this conundrum," he added, "an' either win or git p'izonly throwed. Both on you owe it to yourselves ter explain your way out o' this wrangle, or you'll lose my good opinion; I can't admire a prevaricator."

"Prevaricator," suggested Randolph, mechanically.

"So I said, an' so 'tis. In English, the word is *liar*! Now, Lena, what sort of a giraffe did you meet up in the hall?"

She silently indicated Randolph.

"Tell us all about it."

Lena began the story in a listless way which indicated that she had no confidence in the results.

"It was very late, and I thought every one but me had retired. I grew thirsty, and, as there is no running water in my room, went to that which has been vacant since Mrs. Persellus moved out. In order to see, I lighted the gas at the end of the hall."

"I obtained my drink, and came out into the hall again. Right there I met Bertram."

She nodded to Randolph, who heard in silence. Her air of veracity again impressed him strongly, and he greatly wondered what this mystery was which made himself a bone of contention.

"Bertrand started as if he had rather not have met me," continued Lena, after a pause, "and then stood still. I spoke and asked the vague question: 'Haven't you retired yet?' He said, 'No,' briefly."

"Bertram, I went on, impulsively, earnestly, 'I want you to think carefully, to-night, before you go to sleep, and see if you will not do justice to me. I know I am not a fine lady, but I trust I have ordinary intelligence. In any case, I am your wife, and I love you. To me this is a matter of life or death; I live with you, or die alone. This is my frame of mind. Think of it!—and I your wife!'"

"You are my wife!" he returned.

"I felt the blood rush to my face."

"Do you admit it?" I cried.

"How can I deny it?"

"You denied it before Mrs. Brown."

"Why spread one's secrets broadcast?" he asked.

"But, surely, if you intend to acknowledge me, you would not object to having Mrs. Brown know of it. Bertram, I went on, eagerly, 'I care not how humble my lot in life, nor how

poor I am financially, but I want my just position by your side. Promise me,' I urged, taking his hand, 'that you will acknowledge me as your wife. Don't leave me until you promise!'"

Under the strength of her recollections Lena had lost herself, as it were—unconscious of those who now heard her, she repeated the conversation dramatically, but without regard to effect, for of that she thought not. Suddenly rousing, she looked at Randolph and added:

"Then you bent and kissed me, and declared: 'To-morrow morning, Lena, I will acknowledge you as my wife!'"

"The dickens I did!" cried Randolph.

"The record is beat; time, 2:11, minus 5!" quoth Mosquito Jack, enigmatically.

Young Fenton rallied.

"State the exact time when this occurred," he directed.

"It was quarter to twelve."

"An' I lef' you half-past eleven, Peter Woods," added Jack, seriously. "You jest had time ter get here."

"Be silent, boy! Where did this mysterious Bertram go, after leaving you, Mrs. Dalton?"

"You went to your room, I presume; I did not watch."

"The man was not I, but, unless there are a dozen men who look like me, you really met your husband, that time. When I entered the house, last night, I saw no one, and no light was burning in the hall. The natural inference is that I was just too late to encounter my double. Now, *why* was he here? Jack, can he be a lodger here?"

"Not fer Ebenezer! No such man here."

"Then he was a visitor, or a thief. Will you please summon Mrs. Brown?"

The landlady was called and closely questioned, but she declared that she knew no one who looked like Randolph; that no lodger in the house was in the habit of receiving such a caller, as far as she knew; and that on the previous evening no stranger had called to her knowledge.

The outer door was always kept locked; if a stranger had come in, it must have been in company with some lodger.

"Have your lodgers gone out?" Randolph asked.

"No, sir. All are now at breakfast."

"Will you ask them if any one had a caller?"

The landlady went to the dining-room, but soon returned with her report.

"All of them say they were in the house, and in bed, at eleven o'clock, and not one of them had a caller during the whole evening!"

"Ebenezer Augustus!" exclaimed the Hustler Gamin, "I guess, Peter Woods, the joke is on you!"

Randolph was dumfounded for a moment, but his mind cleared, and he reached a new conclusion in regard to Lena. He requested permission to see the landlady in private, and she conducted him to the parlor.

"Mrs. Brown," he then observed, gravely, "Lena Dalton is deranged!"

"Impossible!"

"I tell you she is the victim of a hallucination. She did not see any such man as she states, and I strongly suspect that Bertram Dalton exists only in her imagination. As for her assertion that I am her husband, it is not true. I'm going to prove it by remaining right here, whereas, if I had been a man who once deserted her, I should not have returned here, last night, after once getting out of her sight, should I? Rely upon it, she is deranged."

"She's as sane as you or I!" declared Mrs. Brown, "and I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"Because I do!"

"Do you believe that she talked with a man in the hall, last night?"

"I believe she talked with *you*, just as she said!"

A knock sounded at the door, and one of the other boarders entered.

"I hear there's a discussion," he remarked, looking at Randolph with no friendly eye, "and am able to put in my mite. What Mrs. Dalton says about the talk in the hall is true; I was in bed, but my door was ajar, and I could both hear and see them. The persons talking were Mrs. Dalton and this man"—pointing to Fenton—"and she tells the story straight. He *did* promise to acknowledge her as his wife this morning!"

"It is false!" cried Randolph, angrily.

"We will see, sir! This case is not *my* funeral, but I won't see a woman misused when she's friendless. I've sent for a policeman, and he shall deal with you, Mr. Woods, and see justice done. Ah! here's the officer, now!"

CHAPTER VII.

JACK CARRIES A DECOY.

"BEGORRA! phat sort ave a family fistival hev you's called me in to sittle now?"

The speaker was the promised policeman, but to Randolph, angry and worried, he did not prove so terrible as was to be expected. He was in citizen's clothes, and his good-humored face was that of Officer Michael O'Dowley.

"Who is de man, and who de woman, who have got tired ave bein' happy an' wants to cut loose from dheir moorin's? Bad idea, Oi tell yez; bad idea! My advice is, niver cut loose from your moorin's, unless your vessel is foundering phere she is. See?"

"We want you to hear this case, Mr. O'Dowley, and give your opinion," explained the officious stranger.

"Oi'm just de mon for dat. Bring on your parties, an' Move-on-Mike will sittle de row. You kin all depind on justice, too, you's can; for my pole-star ave action is Liberty and de Constitution. See?"

"Them's the figger!" agreed Mosquito Jack. "Ef anybody kin do the job, Michael is the luckleberry."

"Faith, an' you're roight entiorely!" agreed the officer.

Randolph Fenton stood with set lips and contracted brows. Were all these people leagued against him, and was the scheme one of black-mail? He thought better of Jack and Move-on Mike than that, but the most credulous person would have been ill at ease under such circumstances.

The parlor door was closed, and Lena told her story. Randolph then put in his general denial, but changing his course on the former occasion, did not offer to prove an *alibi* at the time when Lena claimed that Bertram Dalton was living with her. If Officer O'Dowley was at all practical, he would see at once that the quickest solution of the mystery lay in the *alibi*, and Randolph was too proud to call on his father for assistance.

Move-on Mike listened attentively.

"A peccoliar case; a *very* peccoliar case," he remarked, wisely, when every one had finished. "It needs a long head to grapple wid it, an' it's lucky you's come to me! Oi'm de mon to unravel it. Oi have no saloon pull, an' niver drink intoxicating liquors, but Oi depind on the Goddess ave Liberty an' de Constitution, an' sildom get lift."

"That's so," Jack declared. "Mike is a Jim-dandy!"

"John Marsh, Oi thank you for your good worruds. Now, to business. Dis case is simple, an' dere's no lies been towld; but Mrs Dalton, ye're in dhe wrong whin you claim Peter Woods. You's married a mon above your sub-stratum in social life, an' he's deserted you loike dhe black-guard he was; but it was *not* Peter. 'Twas some feller dat looked loike him, an' you was des'aved by dhe resemblance."

"That's it," Fenton added, with an air of relief.

"Certain."

"But the man in the upper hall?" Mrs. Brown asked.

"Somebody has lied, but it wa'n't Mrs. Dalton. She met her husband dhere joost as she says, and all dis talk took place. Unluckily, she thought it was Peter Woods, an' dhe 'aisy way she went at him gave him a chance to worrum out ave dhe fix. He did it n'ately, an' Oi take off me hat to him!"

"But how did he get into the house?"

"It's me opinion he came at dhe door—though he may have been a burglar—an' dhat somebody is lyin' to shield him. Kape me oidea sacret, though—kape *all* sacret dhat you's hear me say joodicially. Oi hereby take up dis case, an' Oi'll run it through. Me drag-net is out, an' the ra'al Bertram will soon be in!"

"What Move-on Mike says, goes!" commented Jack.

"Sure, John! As for dis case, Oi'm more in earnest than usual, an' Oi'm bound to win. Oi have no saloon pull, but de Goddess ave Liberty an' de Constitution will pull me through. Oi'll ketch Bertram Dalton, or cut de buttons off me blue coat!"

Randolph was getting insight into a circle of life of which he had before known nothing. He saw that all of his companions looked up to Officer O'Dowley as to a superior being, and it was not hard to see, too, that the knight of the locust was a power in his neighborhood.

Mike himself, though as wise of air as an owl, bore his honors meekly, and, though indulging in self-praise, at times, showed a disposition to be fair to all—something that many

other law-givers would do well to take example from.

Mrs. Brown and Lena were impressed with his declarations, and, for the first time, the latter admitted that it was possible she was mistaken in her identification of Randolph as Dalton. She spoke the word "possible" faintly, and looked at Fenton as if imploring him to rise and assert that she was right, not wrong in the identification.

Having smoothed over this matter, Randolph took occasion to speak privately with O'Dowley.

"What kind of a place is that 'club,' where the trouble was last night?"

"Dhere's beer in that crowd, an' dhere's froth."

"Good and bad, eh?"

"Yis."

"Do you know Everald Cheslington?"

"Oi know no good ave him—an' no bad. Oi wish Oi did, for Oi don't take much stock in him."

"What is his business?"

"Begorra, Oi think it's swindling, but divil a bit ave proof can Oi get."

"I think so, too."

"Shows your good sinse!"

"Can't we investigate this man?"

Move-on Mike meditated long and deeply before he answered:

"It might be done, but Oi don't know how to get at him. He's sly, dat flashy gent is."

"I'll tell you how ter git at him."

It was the voice of Mosquito Jack, who, with his usual faculty for overhearing all that was said, had come near enough to get the drift of the present conversation.

"When I left you last night, Peter Woods," the boy continued, "I had an idee in my noddle as big as a boarding-house turkey, an' I set the idee on eggs ter negotiate fer a hatch o' turks. I s'pected I had a tip which would enable me ter learn where Everard hung out when at home, and I worked the tip fer all she was worth. Result: I've got the locate o' his home-base, an' a portable diagram fer gettin' at him."

"What is it?"

"Why can't I take a note ter Everard, purportin' ter be from a feller who wants ter speck-erlate, sayin' as how the writer has heerd that Everard, old boy, kin make men rich fer a consideration, an' he wants a chance. There's some guess-work an' a pile o' cheek in the scheme, but I'm ther boy ter work it. Eh?"

Randolph did not approve of the plan, and was about to say so frankly, but Move-on Mike at once declared that it was just what was needed.

He carried the day, too, and, though Fenton expressed the fear that they would succeed only in alarming the game, the idea was acted upon.

Failing to convince his companions, Randolph wrote the note on about the same lines laid out by Jack, and the latter was sent to deliver it.

The self-styled Hustler Gamin marched off in a business-like and confident manner. He was accustomed to rough life in New York, and, as he assured himself, Cheslington "could not eat him," no matter how he took this bogus application.

Finding the place which Cheslington made his home, Jack perceived that it was a house rather above the average in neatness, externally, though on a street neither clean nor high-toned, and not free from hard characters.

There was no trouble in gaining admission to Mr. Cheslington, but the boy actually was dazzled by the room into which he was shown. It was large and elaborately furnished. Luxurious and costly furniture stood on the rich carpet; a great mirror flashed the light of the sun across the room; paintings of no mean merit were hung on the wall; statuettes of fine design appeared here and there; and bric-a-brac of all kinds, and all in excellent taste, filled the otherwise-vacant recesses.

In an easy-chair sat Mr. Everard Cheslington, himself, his feet elaborately slipped, being on a second chair; a gorgeous diamond pin flashing between the lapels of his rich house-coat, and a tasseled smoking-cap perched on his well-shaped head.

A scene like this Jack had never seen before, and he gazed in open-eyed wonder and silence.

Mr. Cheslington was shrewd, and, often having to make people of lowly life useful to him, always aimed to be polite and agreeable to all. He now let Jack have his fill of wonder until the boy broke the silence with the impulsive exclamation:

"Ebenezer Augustus! but didn't all this cost a pile o' money!"

"My young friend, it did," Everard agreed.

"You're the boss, I take it?"

"I am."

"Bet yer a dollar no Vanderbilt could ekul this!"

"You think it pleasing, I take it."

"Pleasing! Say, thar ain't nothin' like it in no other place in New York—leastways, I don't reckon so. Course you've traveled more nor me, but that's my idee. Anyhow, it's boss, an' I'd give a dollar ter hev my room fixed this way. Why, I ain't got no carpet, no lookin'-glass, no pictur's, an' none o' them!"

He pointed to the statuettes, the name of which he was unable to tell.

"My son," pronounced Mr. Cheslington, gravely, "you may yet have greater luxury than this. The road to all this pomp of life is marked by milestones upon which you will find inscribed these legends: 'Brains'—'Pluck'—'Luck'—'Sobriety'—'Uprightness'—'Christianity.' Put these milestones along the road of your career, and all things will come to you that's good."

"I'll stick 'em up, by Ebenezer!"

"Now, to business!"

"Sartain! Excuse me fer delayin', but I wuz razzled-dazzled. Here's a note a feller give me fer you, an' I hereby hand it over, trustin' yer Honor will peroose it ef the writin' is leggerble."

And he handed over the decoy.

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK GETS INTO TROUBLE.

CHESLINGTON received the letter and, smoking lazily, read it through slowly. Mosquito Jack tried to get a clew to his thoughts by studying his face, but the person in the easy-chair was not made of such plastic stuff as to let every feeling betray him.

"Who gave you this letter?" Everard finally inquired, looking up.

"Andrew Ray, is his name."

"Do you know him?"

"Only by sight."

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Thar ain't no flies on him, mister."

"What is his business?"

"Spect he must hev an income," gravely answered Jack. "Never seen him do any work, an' he's often loafin' around by day. Wears a sprakler in his shirt nigh about as full o' glitter as yourn. Mebbe he's an anarchist, fer I heerd him say once that the blamed perleece ought ter be all sent ter Sing Sing, so decent men could live."

Everard meditated and read the letter again. Jack was shrewd enough to suspect, without the aid of tell-tale facial signs, that the sharper was troubled; and this was a fact. Everard realized that some stranger had a clew, or partial clew to the secret, which he did not want any outsider to know. The question was, how should he be dealt with? Had he been a friend of one of Everard's friends, he would have approached openly, if at all. He came secretly; there was danger in such a man.

How was he to be dealt with?

How could Everard move so as to best assure his own safety?

Laying the note down the sharper began conversation with the messenger on trivial matters. His manner was careless and indifferent, outwardly. It might have deceived many persons; it did not deceive Mosquito Jack.

He knew he was under fire, in a figurative sense. He was equal to the emergency; he met Everard's gaze calmly, and talked without signs of perturbation.

"I'll answer this," observed Cheslington, anon.

He went to the table and wrote a note. Then he rung the bell and a negro appeared.

"Take this to the address on the envelope," he directed.

"Ain't I ter carry it?" Jack asked.

"You can remain with me."

"But I calkerlated on an extra half-dollar fer takin' it back."

"I'll give you the money."

"Leven o'clock, too. I've got ter go, anyhow."

Jack rose. So did Cheslington, who walked to the door and locked it.

"You will still further favor me with your company."

The sharper removed the key, and Mosquito Jack realized that he was a prisoner.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "what kind of a go is this?"

"I always like to know where I stand, and intend to know now. You may be all right, and then, again, you may not. The writer of that note professes to be eager to do certain business with me. If he is what he purports to be he will make baste to come right here, as soon as he gets the missive I have just sent."

Jack's spirits took another drop. Randolph had signed a fictitious name, and given a false address. If the colored man took the letter there he would, of course, return with the information that no such person was known there, and then it would go hard against the Hustler Gamin.

"What hev I got ter do with your trade with him?"

"That's what I wish to learn."

"Do you generally lock a feller up when he comes here with a note?"

"If I suspect him."

"Great Ebenezer! what do you suspect me of?"

"You don't know anything, I suppose, about a fire-escape racket?"

Cheslington eyed Jack closely, and the latter knew it was a question by which the sharper, acting from knowledge, or as an experiment, hoped to see the messenger betray guilt, if such existed.

Mosquito Jack was equal to the emergency.

"Eh?" he returned, innocently.

"Fire-escape, back-yard, police chase!" repeated Cheslington, slowly.

"Don't know nothin' at all w'ot you're talkin' about. Confounded myster'us critter, you be! Clams, chickens, chowder, cheese, chimpanzees! How does *that* sound? See how rydiculous ye be?"

John J. Marsh was growing indignant, and he mimicked Cheslington's solemn manner in a way which would have been laughable at another time.

"You are a plucky chap, I see," returned Everard.

"Pluck? See here, mister, you've made a pris'n'r o' me, an' the thing goes ag'in' my grain. Here we be right in the boss city o' the U. S. A., an' a citizen like me is tol' he must be a captyve. Mister, the citizen is goin' ter hev somethin' ter say about *that*! Open the door, or I'll smash a hole through it!"

As Jack spoke he raised one of his feet, and the heavy shoe looked so formidable that Cheslington attempted to avert the calamity by seizing him, but he was neatly evaded.

Another moment and a vigorous kick from the Hustler Gamin splintered a panel and opened a small hole to the hall. Then Cheslington seized him.

"You young demon! what do you mean?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Hands off, or I'll sarve you the same way."

"No, you won't!"

Jack was struggling in his captor's hands, and the latter put out his strength and dragged him back. Throwing him into a chair, the sharper glared at him venomously.

"Now, what are you going to do?"

"Smash the rest o' the door, later."

"You won't get a chance."

"Anyhow, I've already opened an avenoo fer oxegen an' hydrogen ter sift in."

"You will pay for the damage."

"Say, you consarned, red-headed, weak-eyed dude, what d'ye take me fer? Goin' ter pay fer defendin' myself, be I? I guess not, Ebenezer Augustus! I'm a law-abidin' citizen when let alone, but I kin thrash around an' be wounded onpleasant when I'm misused. Make a note of it, an' let me out afore I scream fer the perleece!"

"It will cost you dearly to try it. Come! let us wind up our skirmish and be sensible. You were sent here by some one who thought to play me for an innocent, but I'm not built right to act the martyr. I am onto your game and shall defend myself; hence, your best way is to own up."

"Ain't got nothin' ter own up to."

"It is false!"

"Oh! mebbe you know my biz!"

"I tell you I am onto your game."

"Then let me alone, will yer? Why should I own up what you know already? I don't know it, an' can't own up. I'm innercent of all things I ought ter be, by Ebenezer! Let me go, will yer?"

Jack attempted to rise, but Cheslington held him, and, foiling his efforts, laughed derisively.

"Poor fool!" he commented, "it's a wonder your mother lets you go out alone. You lack brains!"

The boy ceased to struggle and looked his captor in the eyes; the last words had touched him deeper even than the speaker had intended.

"Mister," he answered, very quietly, "you've got your way now, an' you're runnin' the machine fer all it's worth, but don't you forgit one thing: I shall be clear some time, an' when I be, I won't forgit you. I'll even this thing up ef it takes ten years!"

Cheslington looked thoughtfully at the speaker for a few moments. He had suspected from the first that the letter was the work of an enemy, and, wishing to get at the bottom of the mystery, had pursued a high-handed course with Jack, which he would not have dared to do with an older person.

He had looked upon the messenger with contemptuous indifference because he was a boy, but it now occurred to him that even the boy might be dangerous. There was that in his voice and manner which aroused serious thought.

After a short time the sharper recovered his coolness.

"You'll probably set the North River on fire!" he sneered.

Jack made no answer, and a period of silence followed. Knowing that an effort to escape would be useless, the messenger remained quiet in the chair, while, after a little thought, Everard sat down near him, and, lighting a cigar, smoked and meditated.

Half an hour passed. Then the negro returned.

"Well?" Cheslington questioned.

"Couldn't find de place, sah."

"Couldn't find it?"

"No; leastways, I couldn't find no sech man as Andrew Ray."

"Was he out?"

"The buildin' was a factory, sah, an' nobody ever heerd of Andrew Ray. Only seven or eight men work there, sah, an' nobody with his name."

"You made thorough search?"

"Yes, sah."

"You can go, Dorus."

The colored man took his departure, and Everard turned his gaze upon Mosquito Jack.

"You see where you have brought up, don't you?"

"Eh? I ain't good at riddles."

"You tried to work a snare-game on me, but I tumbled to it right away; I'm too old a bird to be caught with chaff. I've kept you here and tested your sincerity. It proves that Andrew Ray is a myth, just as I thought he was. Now, will you tell me who sent that letter? It will pay you to be frank. If you are stubborn, here you are as my prisoner, and here you stay. On the other hand, if you turn about and help me—tell me the whole story—I'll fill your pockets with cash. What do you say?"

"What kin I say?" Jack returned, with an air of innocence. "I came here in good faith, an' ef Ray has any game on deck, you'll have ter go ter him ter find out what 'tis. I can't tell w'ot I don't know."

"Very well, young Obstinacy, but put this down: You can't leave here until I get the whole truth out of you!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN IN THE HALL.

CHESLINGTON spoke angrily, and it was evident that he intended to do all he threatened.

"How kin I tell w'ot I don't know?" Jack repeated.

"You do know the man who sent you," Everard persisted.

"I tol' you I did. I've seen him afore ter-day, a good many times. He dresses wal, but don't never do any work, as fur as I know; hangs around saloons an' cuts quite a figger. Don't pretend ter know whar he lives, nor w'ot his name is; it may be Andrew Ray, or it may be E. Pluribus Napoleon Jones. I don't know, an' don't keer."

"You talk well," Cheslington returned, "but I am not to be deceived. You are betrayed by the fact that, when my messenger went to the address given by this alleged Ray, Ray was not there. This shows—"

"I reckon he's shy, an' wouldn't show up only ter meet me, the one he expected."

"Boy, you were to take my answer to some other place, and you know it. A public man like me has his enemies, and they are always yelping at his heels like so many curs. One of them is after me now, and it is in your power to help me spot him. Do this, and I'll pay you well; continue obstinate, and you will remain in this house, a prisoner on bread and water, until you do speak out!"

Mosquito Jack saw more plainly than ever that he was in a fix, but was not disposed to show the white feather. It was high-handed work for Everard to make a prisoner of him, and he found it hard to believe he would dare to do it. The sharper might be bluffing; in any case, Jack thought best to present a bold front, himself, and he had the courage to carry out his plan.

A long conversation followed, in which Cheslington betrayed—by his persistence, not by admission—that he was willing to do almost anything if the boy would reveal the whole truth, but he might as well have talked to the foundation of the East River Bridge.

At last he gave up in despair and anger.

Ringing the bell he thus brought the colored man to his presence.

"Dorus," he directed, "take this blamed idiot to your room and hold him prisoner. He is to be held until he gets a move on his tongue. Feed him only on bread and water, and be economical of even those luxuries. This evening I'll have a staple and ring fixed in the wall, so we can chain him up, and we'll keep him there until his hair turns gray, if need be!"

"Yes, sah."

Dorus proveyd himself a willing tool, and at once conducted Jack to another room. The latter went without remonstrance; talk would be idle where Everard was concerned, and Dorus was a large, muscular man. Moreover, Dorus had a rough, unsympathetic face.

The room where the prisoner now was had no peculiarities. It was at the rear of the house, and the lower half of the inside shutters was closed. He could look out and see the sky, but not the area of back yards.

Later investigation proved that shutters and window were alike fastened.

The boy sat down obediently and did some thinking. Captivity was odious to one who had lived so much in the open air, and he was sorry he had not listened to Randolph Fenton when the latter declared that the plan against Cheslington was weak.

Jack did not borrow trouble. Randolph and Officer O'Dowley knew where he had gone, and they would not remain idle a great while when he failed to return.

Growing more cheerful over these reflections he turned to Dorus and entered into conversation. Rough and tough as Dorus seemed to be he might have a soft spot in his heart, and the Hustler Gamin was shrewd enough to know how to reach it, if there was any road.

He began on trivial matters, and talked in his most genial way. Dorus did not reciprocate; he answered, but in a cold, short, jerky, cynical way which proved that he was out of love with the world. Little consolation did Jack get, but he had to make the final trial, anyhow.

"This is pooty tough on me," he sighed.

"Um!" grunted Dorus.

"Don't like bein' shut up, by Ebenezer!"

Dorus said nothing.

"Were you a slave in the war, neighbor?" continued Jack, perseveringly.

"W'ot's d'at ter you?" growled the negro.

"Ef you wuz, you know how I feel now."

"Don't keer how you feel!"

"Liberty is a great thing!"

"Um!"

"I'd like, Dorus, ter 'liven things up an' artom by you an' me goin' out on a little war-trip. We could paint the town red in good style, I'll bet a hat!"

The negro regarded Jack grimly and said nothing.

"You don't look ter me like a hard-hearted man, pard," continued the prisoner.

"Darn nonsense," muttered Dorus.

"There's a good 'eal o' nonsense in this world, comrade. We meet it all through life. It's nonsense fer parients ter put their infants on exhibition ez soon ez they're borned, an' let all the old women in the block come prancin' in ter view that baby like so many scalded cats lookin' hungrily at a canary in a cage. It's nonsense in later life fer us ter take sick with roomatiz, pitchfork fever, apoplexy, cramps, collaric, whisky sours an' logwood beer, but we might git 'em all—some on us do. It's nonsense fer me ter be shut up here, but how be I ter git out?"

"You can't."

"You kin help me."

"I won't."

"Be you rich, Dorus?"

"None o' your business!"

"I ask fer information, an' am ready ter pay fer w'ot I git. My clothes ain't so scrumptious ez some, but I hev friends who wear linen collars an' change their shirts ev'ry two weeks. I kin draw on them fer cash, an' messmate, ef you'll let me go free I'll come down with the money like a blizzard. What say, Dorus?"

"Shut up!"

"Don't talk that way, pal; you hurt my feelin's—"

Dorus rose, lifted a chair and swung it up over his head.

"Shut up, or I'll do ye up so you won't nebbber moah be heard from!" he growled, savagely.

"General, I cave, but you's the first negro I ever knowed that was a rascal!"

Mosquito Jack turned away and had no more to say to the guard, while Dorus sat down and glared at him in a fashion truly piratical. If he had any heart, it was not to be touched by appeals for mercy, and the Hustler Gamin wasted no more words on him.

Half an hour passed, and then the bell in the room rung. Dorus looked thoughtfully and suspiciously at the prisoner, evidently reluctant to leave him. Then the black man went to the window and closed the upper half of the shutters.

"You can't git out," he remarked, scowling, "an' ef you make a racket I'll—see you ag'in!"

With this dark hint he went out, locking the door behind him, but, unmoved by the threat, Jack was on his feet in a moment. He looked eagerly around, as if hoping that an avenue of escape, or a weak spot, had been revealed to him suddenly, but was doomed to disappointment. Investigation proved that the solid shutters at the window were proof against attack.

"No use; but ef I can't git out, mebbe I kin use my eyes a bit. I'll see!"

He set a small table against the door and mounted to the top. The table was weak; it creaked and swayed under him, but he persevered. Over the door was an uncurtained transom, and through this he hoped to get sight of something of interest.

He was not disappointed.

The room was directly opposite the head of a flight of stairs, and as he looked out he had view of both the hall of the floor he was on and that below; and in the lower hall two men were standing in conversation.

One was a stranger; the other was— Jack's face lighted up wonderfully.

"Peter Woods!" he exclaimed. "Whoop! the tide has turned, an' they're here ter rescue me. By Ebenezer! I must yell at Peter!"

He tried to turn the closed transom, but in vain. He glanced around the room; then sprang down and secured a dilapidated old boot, which, evidently, was Dorus's property.

"I'll make a hole through ef I hev ter pay fer my satisfaction!" he declared.

Again he mounted to the table, but one look through the transom was enough to make the triumphant look fade out of his face.

"Peter's goin' away!" he gasped, in dismay.

Sure enough. The man in the lower hall, upon whom he had based his suddenly-conceived hopes, was already at the outside door and, plainly, about to take his departure.

"They've bamboozled him somehow, an' he thinks I ain't here. He'll go an' leave me!"

Suddenly the boot went upward and was poised for a blow.

"I've got ter stop Peter," cried the imprisoned gamin, "or this prison will hold me tight!"

Down came the boot, but it did not break the glass as was intended. At just the wrong time the table, which had continued to creak and groan under the Hustler Gamin, bowed to one side, groaned louder than ever, and then went over sideways and lay as flat as a collapsed balloon.

And Jack?

He was nearly as flat as the table, for he had gone down with it, making a tremendous noise; but he was not long to be kept in that position. If "Peter Woods" was still near it behooved him to be on the alert if he was to be saved, and, seeing he had no further means of reaching the transom, he began to hammer on the door.

"Here I be, Peter!" he shouted, at the top of his voice. "This way, Peter! Help!—help!"

CHAPTER X.

THE KEY IN THE BLACK MAN'S POCKET.

THE door suddenly opened in the boy's face, but it was not "Peter" who appeared. Instead, it was Dorus, who looked fiercer than ever.

"What de furries you mean by all dis racket?" the guard angrily demanded. "Want me ter hit you in de mouf?"

For an answer Mosquito Jack tried to dodge him, but was neatly caught. Dorus began to force him backward.

"Peter!" shouted the prisoner. "Here I be, Peter! This way!—up-stairs!"

The negro kicked the door to, and hustled Jack back and dumped him down in a chair.

"Now, you set dar!" he ordered. "We's had enough ob dis fool-work, an' doan' you forgit it. You keep quiet, or I'll scernish you out flat. Yo' hear me?"

If Jack heard he did not say so; he was looking at the door, eagerly hoping to see it open—to see Peter Woods appear; but Peter did not come. Dorus glared at the prisoner for awhile, and

then, flattering himself he had awed Jack into silence and a harmless condition, released the boy and proceeded to put the room to rights. Muttering his indignation he picked up the fragments of the table, and then gave long and careful attention to the boot, to see if damage had been done that dilapidated piece of leather.

All the while the door was unlocked, and Jack looked expectantly to see his friend enter, but when several minutes had rolled on he was forced to one bitter conclusion: he was not to be rescued. He did not take it kindly.

"Peter must 'a' heerd me!" he thought; "he ain't deaf, an' I yelled loud enough to penetrate anybody's ear-drums. He heerd me, but didn't come ter help me. By Ebenezer! that ain't right!"

Many an older person would have arrived at the same conclusion, and the boy's zeal in the cause took a sudden drop. If he helped Peter Woods, why should not Peter help him?

When satisfied that all hope was past the prisoner settled down to his fate, and did not try to disturb Dorus's taciturnity. The latter fastened the door, put the key in his pocket, glared at Jack, and then lay down on the floor as calmly as if that were the ordinary way of occupying one's time.

Another period of waiting followed. The closing of the shutters would have made the room entirely dark had not Dorus lighted the gas; but this step prevented Jack from knowing anything about the passage of time. He believed night had come, but could not tell positively.

Dorus maintained his position on the floor, and lay with closed eyes, but the slightest movement on the prisoner's part brought them open. Several times Jack believed the guard to be asleep, but he was deceived so often that he was at fault.

He wished the negro would sleep, and sleep soundly. In the black man's pocket was the key of the door. If he could get that key, and have a very little time, he felt sure he could escape. It was not likely any one was on guard in the hall. He could hear no sound in the house, and the rumble of an occasional team in the street was so loud and distinct as to suggest the idea that travel had died away with the close of the day, and that the occasional teams were all that were passing.

It was a favorable time for escape, but—the key was in Dorus's pocket.

How Jack coveted that key!

Miserable bit of deformed brass that it was, he would rather have it than a glittering diamond.

If Dorus would only sleep and give him a chance!

The black man yawned, moved his head as though to get an easier position, looked indolently at the boy and again closed his eyes. Ten minutes later he began to breathe more heavily than at any time before.

The captive's blood seemed to move with a jump. Was the time of hope coming? Was the grim guard actually succumbing to sleep? Jack watched him unceasingly. Never before, perhaps, had any one been so interested in the evil black man. His very breath was precious to Jack, as long as it was spent in slumber.

Time passed.

Jack coughed; the black man did not stir. Jack moved his chair; he called Dorus's name; he rattled his feet. The guard did not move or open his eyes.

"Now for it!" whispered the boy. "It's a desprits undertakin' ter git the key out o' his pocket, but it's got ter be done or my name is Got-Left. I'll try it!"

He rose from the chair, and Dorus remained oblivious of the fact, as far as could be seen. With the lightest steps possible he approached the big form on the floor. Still there was no evidence that he was observed.

The crisis came when he had to run his hand into the negro's pocket, for it was work of the most delicate nature. Was it possible he could do it without causing alarm?

He made the attempt.

Gently, slowly he introduced his hand, but, try as he would, it seemed to him that the heaviest sleeper must be aroused by such an effort. Down went the hand—lower, lower; it touched the key.

He drew back, but the rough horn of the key caught. He disentangled it and persevered. The key was fully in his hand, at last!

The negro slept on. It was genuine slumber; for he had yielded up the treasure.

Mosquito Jack moved lightly to the door. He fitted the key as silently as possible; he turned the bolt back; he opened the door. The dimly-lighted and deserted hall was revealed to his gaze. He paused not to view it critically,

but crept down the stairs. No one was in the lower hall, and all was quiet. The outer door was locked, but he quietly turned the key, passed out and hurried down the steps. He stood on the street, with the star-dotted heavens above him and an open way to the right and the left.

With quick steps he hurried toward home.

He no longer had any fear, for he was not the person to be kidnapped on the streets of New York. A few minutes' walk took him to Mrs. Brown's boarding-house, and he entered at once. No one was in the parlor, and he hurried up to Randolph Fenton's room.

Entering, he found that young man calmly smoking a cigar, but he sprang up at once.

"So you're back?" he exclaimed.

"Well, I reckon!"

"Have you had trouble?"

"Not an artom!" returned Jack, with sarcasm.

"Then what has kept you?"

"Peter Woods, what do you s'pose has kept me?"

"I am at a loss to know. I have been worrying about you, but prevented from doing anything by the fact that I was robbed of our ally. Officer O'Dowley was detailed for special duty, and sent away, or I should have insisted upon his going right to Cheslington's house."

Mosquito Jack's eyes were sparkling with indignation.

"Wanted ter help me, did yer?"

"Certainly I did."

"Then why didn't you come when I called to yer for help?"

"Called to me for help?" echoed Randolph.

"That's w'ot I said."

"I don't comprehend."

"Ef you's so interested in my affairs, why didn't ye give me a lift when you was in Cheslington's house?"

"I never was there."

"But I seen you."

"When?"

"Why, this very arternoon!"

Randolph looked bewildered for a moment, and then returned somewhat sharply:

"This is no joking matter."

"Bet yer life it ain't! That's w'ot I thought when you stood at the foot o' the stairs, an' I was at the top an' yellin' to yer fer help like a Sioux Injun. Yes, I yelled; but did you come? Nary come! You jest left me to my fate; me, yer own agent w'ot wuz doin' your own business, an' got gobbled in doin' it. Peter Woods, that's w'ot you may call standin' by a feller's frien's, but ef it's your style o' doin' it, I don't keer ter be your frien'. No, sirree, Ebenezer!"

Jack was something of a philosopher, and, despite a degree of grumbling, had felt that Peter Woods would be able to explain away his apparent desertion of his ally, but this idea had vanished. Peter had taken a position which aroused all of the boy's spirit, and he poured out this address with indignation and sarcasm.

Randolph looked at him blankly.

"I don't understand at all, but if you really mean that I have been in Cheslington's house, you are all wrong. I have not been there!"

"But I seen you there!"

"Jack, you seem to be sincere, so let us get down to this subject in a systematic way. You are laboring under a mistake, but we may be able to explain all. I have not been in Cheslington's house, and have been greatly troubled about it. The idea has grown upon me that it was folly to let you go there. Cheslington has several times been in this house, in days gone by, to visit his friend who had the room upstairs, until a fortnight ago. I said, this morning, that he must have seen you here, and would recognize you, but you thought not. Did not the result prove me right?"

The messenger regarded Randolph in a peculiar way.

"Set down, an' you shall hear," he directed.

The story was told. Randolph did not once interrupt until Jack declared that he saw him in the hall.

"You have heard me say I was not there, John. I now repeat it; your eyes deceived you."

"By Ebenezer! then it was your ghost!"

"The man looked like me, did he?"

"Did he? I should asseverate!"

"From your position up-stairs you could not have seen clearly—"

"But I did! The light was good, an' I never had a better chance; never! I take a fancy ter you, Peter, an' ef you say you wa'n't there, it goes; but, great guns, he was your dead ringer."

"This is strange."

"Say," cried Jack, with sudden spirit, "kin it be the feller was Lena Dalton's husband?"

CHAPTER XI.
FLIPPY JIM.

In his bewilderment Randolph had not before thought of the theory which Jack now advanced, but it was so striking that he could not fail to give attention to it.

"There can't be more nor a bushel o' fellers that look like you," pursued the Hustler Gamin, "an' as we know by Lena that there's one, why not kinder sift the chaff an' see ef there's any grain in it."

"Do you suppose this man was there to see Cheslington?"

"Duuno. He was talkin' with a chap who wuz a stranger ter me, but Everard might 'a' been close by, jest out o' my sight. Say, I can't hardly b'lieve that wa'n't you, by Ebenezer!"

Randolph reiterated his denial, and fully convinced his young friend, but the latter harped upon the subject until the unknown became a person in whom both felt a keen interest. Who was he? What was he doing at Cheslington's house? Was he really Bertram Dalton?

They only abandoned these speculations when Randolph returned to the subject of Mosquito Jack's unlucky errand. What was to be expected from it? Jack was back safe and sound, but wily Cheslington now knew that some one was working against him, and would be a hard person to catch. Randolph was almost discouraged, and spoke of giving up the struggle.

"Don't yer do it!" his ally advised, with emphasis. "I don't know the secret o' the bee that is stingin' you, but I say, le's fight it out! I'm interested, I be; an' now we hev saddled the hoss, I want ter ride him. Cheslington is a mean scamp, that's sure; he's legitemate game, an' we're nat'ral hunters. Le's foller right at his heels, do no barkin', but pull him down when we kin."

Fenton did not answer. It was a matter of keen regret that they were no nearer solving the mystery of Everard Cheslington's secret business than before, and Randolph was tempted to give up. After all, what proof had they that the sharper had meddled with Colonel Fenton's financial affairs?

"Perhaps I had better go to work somewhere, and think no more about proving myself innocent in the eyes of a man who has driven me out of his house," was the bitter reflection.

Officer O'Dowley now appeared, fresh from his special duties, and eager to learn the result of Mosquito Jack's venture. The report did not please him.

"Begorra! Oi'd give me nixt month's wages to get wan crack at dhat crook's head!" he declared. "The way they abused ye, John, was atrocious, but niver you moind. Move-on Moike is sthille on deck, an' he'll give thim a lesson they won't forget. Dhis is just dhe chance Oi've been lookin' for, an' if the Goddess ave Liberty an' the Constitution don't go dead back on me, Oi'll earn a sergeant's berth by baggin' thim scoundrels!"

The honest patrolman was as enthusiastic as usual, but, this time, he did not fire Randolph in like manner.

"How will you do it?" the latter asked.

"How? Not by a saloon pull, for Oi have have none, but by me wits, begorra!"

Fenton did not find anything very encouraging in this statement. It was a good deal easier to talk than to do. He therefore sat in silence, while Move-on Mike continued his words of prophecy. In this line he captured Cheslington, fixed guilt upon him, had him brought before the court and sentenced; and then contemplated himself as a sergeant.

All this pleased him, but did Randolph no good, and matters remained at this point when O'Dowley went out to go on his beat.

Fenton was not in good humor, and, rejecting Jack's quiet hint that they could enjoy themselves that evening by "telling stories," he left the house and set off on a lonely walk.

He had no definite destination in his mind, but, half unconsciously, went toward his old home. A block away he paused and hesitated to go further. There was danger that he might encounter Colonel Fenton, and this he would not do willingly for many dollars, but the fascination was so strong that he could not resist.

"I'll go on the opposite side of the street," he thought, "and ought to escape discovery."

He was soon facing the family home. No perceptible change had come over it. Lights burned in the parlor, and in his father's room, but no one was visible.

"I wonder if they are all happy but me?" he muttered, bitterly. "Aunt Evelyn, sister Althea and brother Wayland were always affectionate to me, but the human mind accommodates itself to situations as a pliable garment yields to the

form of its wearer. I am an outcast now, and I dare say they are all reconciled to it."

He felt guilty when he conceived this idea, for he had the best of reasons for believing it false. Between himself and each member of the family the kindest relations always had existed, and there could be no doubt that there was deep grief in the Fenton house.

But who could be a philosopher at his age, when unjustly banished from home?

After awhile he walked on and was fast leaving the neighborhood when, turning a corner, he came face to face with a second young man. Fenton stopped short, but the other pedestrian, after a moment of surprise, seized upon his hand joyfully.

"Randolph!" he cried. "Thank fortune you are here again!"

"Yes, Wayland; it is I."

"You have just come from the house—"

"Wrong! I have not been near the house."

"Then I am just in time to go with you—"

"No, Wayland; I am not going."

"But you have seen father?"

"No."

"Let me call him."

"Most decidedly not; I will not see him!"

"But Althea and Aunt Evelyn—"

"Not even them! Mind you, brother, I bear them no ill-will—how can I?—but I am an exile from yonder house, and an exile I intend to remain. I should not have seen you had we not chanced upon one another. Understand me, Wayland, I do not care less for you, and Althea, and Aunt Evelyn, than I did of old, but I am no longer a Fenton, and, until I am able to match every one of Colonel Fenton's dollars with a dollar of my own, I am a stranger to all the family!"

"My dear brother!" cried Wayland, "don't talk like this!"

"How would you have me talk?"

"Don't make the innocent suffer for the—"

"Wayland, I know I owe you only good wishes, I know how kind and brotherly you are—"

"Don't speak of me. Think of Althea and Aunt Evelyn."

"I do—with kindness."

"Then come with me and see them."

"No!"

"But why not?"

"Because I am exiled from that house. There, there! don't argue the point, Wayland. I hope"—here the exile's voice grew sarcastic—"that Colonel Fenton's business has prospered to-day, now I am out of the way."

"On the contrary, all has gone wrong."

"Strange!"

"This morning he planned a deal, but, in the closing hours of business, when he would have plucked the plum from the tree, somebody nabbed it just ahead of him. It was the old story, but he can't lay this to you, Randolph. As he planned it all after you left, you can't have been the rock in his way. I judge that he realized this, for there was a very grave and thoughtful expression on his face. He probably realized—he *must* have done so—that he had accused you wrongfully. I'll wager something that if you now go to the house you will be received warmly by him."

"I shall not go!"

"But, Randolph, Althea and I are heart-broken by this affair. For our sister's sake, come home!"

"No!" was the firm response. "You urge the point in vain, Wayland. I should be a clod were I to overlook the treatment father gave me. I was innocent, yet he drove me out of his house. I shall never enter it again; I am an outcast; I am no longer a Fenton. Ay, I even have changed my name. There! say no more; you can't move me. Who has taken my place in the private office?"

"No one."

"Isn't there a person in New York that the colonel can trust?"

"I don't know. I feared he might ask me, but I should have refused the invitation. I want none of the secrets of the firm, and, in any case, would not take a position from which you had been ousted so unceremoniously."

For half an hour longer the brothers talked, and Wayland used all of his persuasion to change Randolph's purpose, but in vain. They finally separated, and "Peter Woods" started toward his new home. He had refused to inform Wayland where he was staying, being resolved to sink from sight entirely, as far as his relatives were concerned.

Although he did not wish his father further financial misfortunes, he experienced considerable satisfaction from the fact that the reign of

misfortune was continuing just the same as when he was at the office. His innocence was being established by the unknown enemy of the Fenton business house.

In due time Randolph neared Mrs. Brown's boarding-house, but did not reach it without encounter. He was suddenly accosted by what he at first thought was a beggar, but what soon resolved itself into a form whose rags and red face proclaimed him Flippy Jim, the rounder seen at the club-room.

"Hallo, Peter!" Jim saluted, in a wheezy voice.

"Hallo!"

"Seen you at the club-room, yer know."

"Yes."

"Out fer a spree?"

"I have no money for a spree."

"No? Sad fack! Melancholy spetterkle! Nor me, Peter; nor me!"

Flippy Jim wiped his watery eyes, and appeared deeply affected. Randolph did not covet such company, for the old rounder was simply disgusting, with his dirt and odor of liquor; but Jim had taken him by a button, and he was an unwilling captive. Jim rallied.

"Want'er make some money?" he asked.

"Who does not?"

"You'n me kin do it ef we work tergether, an' I know the way. Ever you hear of a man named Everard Cheslington?"

CHAPTER XII.

MORE NEWS FROM THE DOUBLE.

FLIPPY JIM had caught Randolph's interest at one stroke; the latter no longer wished to break away from the rounder, and he lost sight of Jim's rags and dirt. He was shrewd enough not to betray unusual interest, and carelessly returned:

"Ever hear of him? I believe the name was mentioned at the club; was it not?"

"Very likely," the rounder agreed.

"Is he a friend of yours?"

Jim scratched his chin until the bristles there rattled loudly.

"Wa-al, I can't exactly claim him as a friend, fer I ain't very often spoke to him, yer see; but I've drank in the same saloon!"

"That's about the same thing."

"Everard is a mighty fly boy."

"Is he?"

"Bet yer life! Thar ain't nobody in this ward who kin make more money than him, though how he does it has always been a mystery. He ain't no great shakes at keards, an' when he sets down ter play poker he generally has a pair o' deuces, or a bob-tail flush, an' no better. Hencely, Ches can't be gittin' his livin' at gambolin'. See?"

Flippy Jim seemed to be maundering on in true bummer fashion, and Randolph encouraged him.

"What is your theory?"

Jim looked around cautiously, and then lowered his voice to a husky whisper.

"I think he's bleedin' some rich dooks."

"By blackmail?"

"Not edzackly, but by stealin' their secrets in some way. I dunno how, but ef I could read writin' I'd soon find out."

"How?"

Flippy Jim produced a big brass key.

"I take it yer optics sees that? Wal, that's a mascot, that is. It's the key—or one on 'em—ter Cheslington's office, up in the club buildin'!" The key sparkled dully, but, nevertheless, it fascinated Randolph.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"Found it on the floor, where it fell out o' Everard's pocket. Jee-whiz! but didn't I slew it inter my pocket on de run! Says I to myself, says I: 'James, yer chance has come,' an' I pocketed the key. Why? 'cause I've been in his office; often done errands fer him. Hev seen the papers that fill his desk; papers that represent a heap o' money. Heerd him say, once, that one little slip o' paper he held was equivalent ter bund'nds o' dollars, ef put right end on fer the stock money. Great old place is that office, Peter, an' the papers in the desk is jest as good as gold. Here's the key, yer see, an' I could walk in an' get all them secrets, but I can't read. See?"

Randolph listened with rapt interest. The key to Everard Cheslington's office! That meant a good deal to him, and he coveted the well-worn bit of metal. He said nothing, and Flippy Jim continued:

"Don't s'pose you want ter go inter company wid me, do yer?"

"In what?"

"Makin' a raid on that office, gittin' his secrets, an' then makin' money out o' them."

"Do you know that would be burglary?"
 "We needn't take nothin' away."
 "In any case, it would be breaking and entering."

"Don't see why, ez long ez we don't merlest nothin'. We only want his secrets. I've heard it said he has some high-toned speculator on the hip that he's saltin' bad. Why can't we git a shake at the dice-box?"

It was a strong temptation. It might be absurd to suppose that Cheslington was the man who had been systematically swindling Colonel Fenton, but it remained a fact that some one had been doing it. Why was it not as likely to be Cheslington as any one else? Randolph wondered if it actually would be a misdemeanor to enter the crook's office under such circumstances. Did not the end justify the means?

"Wish you'd chip in," added Flippy Jim.

The words suggested another theory. Cheslington had been put on his guard by Mosquito Jack's visit. Perhaps he intended to strike back. Was Jim a safe man to trust? What if he was acting as a decoy for Cheslington?

Carefully he studied the bummer, who gave no evidence of secret purpose, though his appearance was certainly disreputable enough. The fascination of the venture was too strong to be resisted, and he yielded to his fate.

"What if I agree?" he made answer.

"Why, you kin read the dockymunts, an' I'll do de rest. One turn o' this key opens the door."

"But how can we evade the members of the club?"

"Wait until they've gone away."

"Suppose we are detected?"

"We sha'n't be. I've studied the sittervation until I'm dead sure on't, yer see. We'll wait until erbout one o'clock, an' then slide in nice an' light-footed, an' no solitary pilgrim will chant a note of alarm. The old buildin' is quiet as a grave after half-arter twelve. Oh! there never wuz a safer snap!"

"I'll go in with you!"

"Good boy, Peter!"

"Where do we meet?"

"Why not right here?"

It made no difference to Randolph, and he said so; then, after a few preliminaries had been attended to, they separated. Randolph went on toward the boarding-house, but not in a light-hearted way. Although actuated by the best of motives the coming work dampened his spirits, and he felt like a man who was about to take the first step in crime, impelled by fate.

At times, too, his doubts were renewed in regard to Flippy Jim. The man was an utterly worthless specimen of humanity, and Randolph was ready to believe him a criminal by will and in practice; certainly, he could not see how any one could sink so low and retain any sense of honor. A fit subject for a decoy was Flippy Jim. Was he a decoy, in reality?

Reaching Mrs. Brown's house he was met at the door by Mosquito Jack.

"Say, Peter, you're jest in time," the boy explained, in a low voice. "They're hevin' a confab in there, an' you are bein' mentioned, frequent."

"Who is there?"

"Aunt Sariah an' Lena Dalton. Since they come in they are havin' a great pow-wow over w'ot you said to Lena at the corner o' Broadway an' Houston street, awhile ago."

"I? I have not been near that corner, nor have I seen Mrs. Dalton outside the house."

"They said they seen you."

"Has my double shown up again? I must see these women at once!"

He unceremoniously entered the parlor. Lena and Mrs. Brown were there, but he thought the glances they bent upon him did not have much good will in them.

"What is this I hear?" he demanded. "Has my double been seen again?"

"We saw you!" asserted Mrs. Brown.

"Will you never learn to discriminate between me and my double? I learn that you thought you saw me at the corner of Broadway and Houston street but I have not been near there in a month."

Mrs. Brown held up her hands in horror, but even she realized the folly of again arguing this disputed point. It was clear, however, that she was prepared to insist that she had seen him there.

"I grow more and more interested in this Bertram Dalton," declared Randolph, "and shall be glad to have you tell me just what has occurred."

"This has occurred. Right after I got my work done I went out with Lena, and we were walking near Broadway and Houston when all

at once a voice spoke her name. We looked around. A cab had driven up to the curbstone and was following along by us, and in the cab—the landlady paused, smiled sarcastically, and added what evidently was not in her mind: "In the cab was Bertram Dalton!"

"Go on!" Fenton urged.

"He asked me to walk on fifty feet or so, to give him a chance to speak privately with Lena; and I went. She must tell the rest, herself."

"You said," eagerly began Lena looking at Fenton, and then, checking herself, added: "Bertram said that the time was near at hand when he would keep his promise and acknowledge me as his wife. He frankly said he had not done right—"I've been a scoundrel!" were the words he used, but he need not have spoke so severely. Anyway, he declared that he had let ignoble pride stand in his own light long enough, and was going to turn over a new leaf."

"I devoutly hope he will!" exclaimed Randolph.

"So do I," coincided Mrs. Brown, nodding wisely, and looking at her new lodger.

"Bertram declared that he was going to make our marriage public inside of a week. 'A change has come over me of late,' he said; 'a very serious change. Events have occurred that ought to touch a heart of granite. Mine is not harder than that, if I have acted the villain in the past, and I will undo my evil work if I can. There are some preliminaries to arrange before I can present you to the world, but by to-morrow evening I can name the date. I want you to meet me at Central Park, at eight o'clock.'"

"A distant trysting-place," Randolph commented.

"It is to be at the entrance at the corner of Fifth avenue and Fifty-ninth street."

A sudden idea occurred to Fenton.

"Do you think it safe?"

"Safe?"

"Yes. The Park is dark in many places at that hour, and these places are deserted at times. The principal frequenters of the Park at that hour are young couples, who are usually too much absorbed in each other to be company for any one else. Policemen are not common. I remember, a few steps beyond the entrance you name, a singularly dark walk which leads off to the left through descending ground. I don't know Bertram Dalton, but my opinion is that a once-deserted wife would not do wisely to take that dark path with him at that hour!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A HAZARDOUS VENTURE.

LENA looked at Randolph wonderingly.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Bertram Dalton," Randolph answered, "has shown a strong desire to get rid of you in the past. May he not be a man desperate enough to accomplish his purpose at all hazards? In plain words, would your life be safe in such a lonely place, with him?"

Mrs. Brown looked startled, but Lena impulsively cried:

"You wrong Bertram by the suspicion. He may not be perfect; it is true that he deserted me, his own wife, because I was below him in social life; but, sir, he is incapable of crime. I would trust him anywhere."

"Woman-like!"

"Women is queer critters!" added Mosquito Jack, sagely.

"I think Mr. Woods is right," declared Mrs. Brown. "You must not meet the man there."

"I know it will be safe."

"You must not risk it."

"I have promised Bertram," answered Lena, with unexpected force, "and I am going to keep my word. I shall meet him just as I have said!"

Mrs. Brown remonstrated; Randolph did not. It had occurred to him, suddenly, that no better chance ever would be offered to see his double. By all means, let Lena meet him, and he—Randolph—would be near to protect her, and to see what Bertram was like. So he planned, but what lay between himself and that hour? Another night must intervene, and in that night he was to accompany Flippy Jim on a hazardous expedition.

Would he be able to get to Central Park on the following evening?

The insinuation against Dalton had done more to shake Lena's faith in her belief that Randolph was he than anything else, and she now began to wonder that she ever had made such a mistake. Alike as the two were, she began to see points of difference in voice, form, hair, eyes and manner—or imagined she did.

Randolph no longer had much place in her

thoughts, which all turned to Dalton, and her air-castles were built high and in dazzling style.

Fenton went to his room, and, as usual, Mosquito Jack accompanied him. On this evening the young man would have preferred to be free from all company, for the shadow of coming events was over him darkly; but it was not easy to get rid of the Hustler Gamin.

Jack remained until, as the time approached when Fenton was to meet Flippy Jim, he rose and began to exchange his usual suit of clothes for the cheap garments recently purchased under the boy's guidance.

"Goin' out?" Jack asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know where I shall bring up."

"Let me go, too."

"I can't. If I were going on one of our prowling expeditions I should be glad to have you along, but this is different."

"Why do you put on yer Giant Grim suit?"

"I must wear something."

"You said that was fit only fer a burglar trip."

"We sometimes change our minds."

"Wish you'd change yourn an' let me go."

"I would, if I could."

"Where'd you say you's goin'?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow."

Mosquito Jack was pertinacious when he set out to be, and, in this case, he felt that he had reason to be interested. Randolph's manner, as well as the change of clothes, indicated that something unusual and important was about to occur. Few persons were quicker to read signs than Jack, and he was now all on fire, in a figurative sense. Love for adventure and curiosity alike beset him—hence his persistence.

He took the last retuff quietly, and said no more about it. Randolph finished his toilet, watched the time, and finally prepared to leave the house. Jack yawned as if he were the sleepiest boy in New York, and walked toward his own room, drowsily answering his friend's "Good-night!"

The moment Fenton's eyes were off of him all the sleepy signs vanished as if by magic, and his bright eyes gleamed brighter than usual.

"Ebenezer Augustus!" he muttered, "w'ot sort of a go is up now? Peter has got some risky job on hand, an' it wouldn't s'prise me an' arton ef he means ter begin where I left off, an' try a hack at Everard. Resky chap, Peter is; an' I feel it my duty to look out fer him!"

As soon as pursuit was safe he was out of the house, and following close after Randolph.

There was no reason why pursuit should fail to be successful; Fenton did not once look around. He walked on rapidly until the place of meeting was reached. Flippy Jim was there already, and ready for business. Jack saw them converse for a few moments, and then start off together.

"Funny!" muttered the observer. "Ef Peter keeps sech company as that a great while he will hev a nose on him like the head-light of a locomotive. But that ain't w'ot Peter is lookin' fer; he's got some desp'rit game on hand, an' it troubles me. I wouldn't trust Flippy Jim ez fur ez I could sling an ellerphunt by the tail, an' ef he's pilot fer Peter, Peter is liable ter come ter grief!"

Beset with these fears Mosquito Jack followed on, nor was he surprised when "Peter" and Jim paused at the door leading to the club-room. Knowing that, according to the rules of the organization, the place should be deserted at that hour, the spy was curious to see what would be done next.

Flippy Jim fitted a key and opened the door.

Jack was startled.

"Say! there's mischief afoot!" he commented, quickly. "Jim never got that key by honest means, an' as I don't see how he could steal it, how did he get it? By Ebenezer! it looks ter me as ef he had been hired ter lure Peter in!"

The two men had entered and closed the door. Jack was wise enough to realize that his own proper mode of procedure was to go at once to Officer O'Dowley, but he first mechanically tried the door. Greatly to his surprise, it opened freely.

The key remained in the lock, and he surmised that the old rounder had turned it with the intention of locking the door, but, unknown to himself, had failed.

Temptation was thus put in the Hustler Gamin's way; the temptation to see for himself what was being done. He entered fully, locked the door and crept up the stairs.

Randolph and the old rounder had preceded him. The club-rooms were vacant, but the sickening odor of beer and tobacco-smoke remained.

Flippy Jim passed on without losing time, and soon reached the door of Cheslington's office. There he paused and listened for some time, with the alleged object of making sure no one was within.

Fenton had chance more than ever to wonder if Jim was trustworthy, but it was too late to turn back.

The rounder suddenly stood erect.

"All seems serene, your Highness!" he observed. "We will now pass the portals of the tiger's den, an' proceed ter stick pins in the ferocious beast's royal sides. Selah!"

He opened the door. Producing a match he lighted the gas; the room had no occupant save themselves.

Randolph looked around eagerly. At last he was on the scene of Cheslington's secrets, something that had agitated his mind almost constantly since he imperfectly overheard that conversation from the fire-escape. First view of the place, however, was somewhat disappointing; no great secrets sprung into view at the opening of the area to view—it was like the office of some honest business man.

Flippy Jim unlocked the door, and then pushed back the top of the desk.

"Here we be!" he remarked, cheerfully.

Fenton looked anxiously at the neatly arranged papers, of which there was a generous supply.

"An' there's the secrets," continued the old rounder. "We can't expect nothin' but w'ot the papers tell, an' I hope a good 'eal from 'em. I've been a poor man all my life, an' old age is gittin' me in its clutches. Now or never is my time ter fill my pockets with honest metal. Go for the papers, Peter; go fer them!"

Randolph took out a document at random. It was a single sheet of paper, partially covered with words scrawled in pencil. He read as follows:

"B. Q. C. dropping. Sell at once! D. holds fast and booms his stock. Evidently intends to force things. Being well backed, is likely to succeed. Should say, buy L. A. 5 as much as possible.

"WY CH COR. MEM."

Many readers would have found this a hopeless jumble. Not so Randolph Fenton. He had read that message before—or, rather, one precisely like it. It was a telegram which had been received in Colonel Andrew Fenton's private office, less than a week before. It had come from a corresponding member of a syndicate to which the colonel belonged, and, on the strength of it, the elder Fenton had speculated heavily—speculated and lost.

The young man stood staring at the paper, actually startled by the discovery, until Flippy Jim's voice broke the silence.

"W'ot does he say?"

Randolph aroused. He had been partially prepared for such discoveries, and, though scarcely able to credit his good fortune, managed to rally and realize that the rounder must not be let into the secret. He read the message aloud.

"W'ot in p'izon does et mean?" Jim demanded. "Et's all wuss than Choctaw!"

There was nothing obscure to it as far as Jim's companion was concerned. The abbreviations were all well known in the Fenton office; he had been accustomed to them for years. He replied: "I see no key to it, here."

"Drat the luck! I don't see how they make use o' sech rubbish, nor where they got it."

Randolph could have echoed the last part of the statement. The message was there, but where had the conspirators obtained it?

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE DEATH-ROOM.

"TACKLE the next!" Flippy Jim suggested.

Randolph obeyed, and found a paper similar to the first; one, too, which he as readily recognized. It had been received in Colonel Fenton's office; its advice had been acted upon as far as the attempt went, but some one had been just ahead of the colonel, and had reaped the benefit.

Investigation showed that each and every paper in that pigeon-hole was of like nature. There lay the secret of Fenton's mysterious losses—the secret as far as penetrated; but the greatest puzzle of all still remained: How had Cheslington obtained copies of private telegrams, and, obtained them, too, before they reached the colonel?

"This is all rot!" declared Flippy Jim, in disgust. "W'ot do we know about 'B 2 C dropping,' 'J N 6 rising,' '5 7 steady,' an' all that rubbish? Grapple with dockymunts in some other hole, an' see what they say."

Randolph was not reluctant, and the search went on. He sat at the desk like one in his

own office, going over paper after paper, while the rounder stood beside him. Jim never before had regretted the lack of education as he did then. The enigmatical nature of the papers left him no ray of light, and inability to read compelled him to act a passive part; he could do no more than listen.

Now and then he looked searchingly at his ally, troubled with the fear that he might be the object of deception, but could neither prove nor disprove his doubts. One consolation alone remained; he had brought a flask of whisky, from which he frequently drew encouragement. If the younger man had a monopoly as a reader, Jim was similarly situated as to the liquor; Randolph declined to share Jim's folly.

Further important discoveries were scarce. There were papers showing that the conspirators had profited by the knowledge dishonestly gained, and memoranda of numerous transactions, but not a word which would throw light on the still dark points.

Also, there were many papers in regard to horse-racing matters, which indicated brisk business in that line.

Flippy Jim grew disgusted.

"Say, do you understand all this rubbish?" he demanded, at last.

"How can I guess the ciphers?"

"That's the p'int."

"Possibly I could find some one who would be able to guess what it means."

"It's worth tryin'; but, say! do you s'pose all the rest o' the papers is like them?"

"Looks that way."

"Then let's clear out!"

"Are you discouraged?"

"Dead discouraged! I've got all the '2 B 9,' an' 'G C 3 D' that I want; I hev, by gravy! Ef there's any daylight ter be got by an expert out o' the papers, it's jest ez wal ter gobble a fistful an' take away, as ter go over another bushel, an' only git '2 F O O L S' ter reward us, which same cipher is mine, an means 'Two Fools! Them is me!'"

"Perhaps you are right. The utter absence of letters, and other direct evidence, goes to show that Cheslington was too shrewd to preserve anything which would betray him. He has done his secret business—"

"Dishonest, too, I'll bet my head!"

"A safe wager, I think. Anyhow, he's done his business and left no sign."

Randolph put the desk to rights as far as possible, but retained enough of the papers to satisfy his desires. He was resolved to take them to Police Headquarters, and let the detectives there solve the rest of the mystery.

As he rose from the chair he noticed a new circumstance.

"Where does all this smoke come from?" he asked.

"Dunno," Jim answered.

"The room is full of it."

"Yes; tickles my noses."

"Well, it's not our affair."

The young man reclosed the desk, and then they turned to leave. Flippy Jim unlocked the door and essayed to open it—it did not respond readily.

"Sticks!" he remarked, and jerked at the knob, without success.

"That's odd," commented Randolph. "Let me see!"

He first tried the key and made sure the bolt was turned back, and then pulled at the knob. The door was fast.

"What kind of a ding-dasted thing is it?" Jim demanded. "Can't imagine why it should act so. Let me have a heave at it!"

He gave another jerk which produced effect, but not in the way he desired. He suddenly went over on his back, and scrambled to his feet holding the knob in his hand; it had been torn from the door.

"Hannah Isaac!" he ejaculated. "How are we ter get out now?"

"We must use the window. It opens out on the fire-escape, and by means of that, we can gain the wash-room easily. The only trouble is, the broken knob will reveal the fact that intruders have been here."

It was not the only trouble, as he found to his sorrow. Iron shutters were on the window, and when they tried to open them they found the shutters immovable. If Mosquito Jack had been present he would have found in this fact a reminder of his experience at Cheslington's lodging-house, for when means of unfastening them were looked for, the effort ended in failure.

"Darned ef we ain't prisoners!" Flippy Jim ejaculated.

"I don't understand this," Randolph admitted,

with a troubled air. "It is not strange the window should be fastened, but why does this door, through which we entered so readily, baffle us now?"

"Say, you don't s'pose we're in a trap, do yer?"

"If the door is fastened on the other side, it did not fasten itself."

"I b'lieve it is fastened."

"Then we have enemies in this building, who have trapped us. What will they do next? Perhaps, even now, they are summoning enough of their gang to set upon and overpower us!"

The idea alarmed Flippy Jim, and he began to wring his hands and lament in husky tones. If he had ever been a hero that noble quality had been consumed by the fiery waves of alcohol with which his stomach so long had been insulted, and the quality did not show, then. He could act the yelping cur, but not the aggressive mastiff. He soon had fresh cause for alarm.

"Jim," Randolph exclaimed, "do you notice how thick the smoke is getting here?"

"Yes; I see it."

"It does not come from any ordinary cause. As the window is closed it cannot drift in here and an ordinary fire in this building ought not to send smoke around in this shape. Can it be the place is on fire?"

The old rounder's red face grew pale.

"On fire!" he gasped. "Oh! oh!—they hev found us, shut us in, an' now set fire ter the buildin'! They're goin' ter burn us alive! We are helpless, an' they kin do it. I hear the flames a-crackin' now! We are dead men! Oh! oh! oh!"

He danced wildly about and his voice rose in a screech which would have been laughable at any other time; whisky had spoiled his voice, and it was far from musical. He ran to the door suddenly and began to hammer on it with his fists.

"Lemme out!" he screeched. "I ain't done nothin', I ain't; 'twas this other feller with me. I ain't fit ter die, an' fire will kill me quick. Lemme out! I'm burnin' up! Oh! oh! oh!"

"Be silent, coward!" commanded Randolph, sharply, dragging him back from the door. "You can do nothing by appealing to men who have doomed us to death. If such men actually are there, pleadings are useless; if we are in error in supposing such a thing, we may be able to escape. Come! let us together fling ourselves against the door, and demolish it!"

It was not easy to get Flippy Jim in condition to help in this direction, but he finally rallied a little. The attempt was a failure, however; the door withstood all of their attacks without showing signs of weakness.

The situation was growing serious, for smoke had gathered in the room until breathing was a matter of difficulty. This accumulation puzzled Fenton until he saw it was all entering at one point, and investigation revealed an open register there, from which the smoke was pouring.

Worse than this, he found it was out of order, and could not be shut off.

"We must stop it, or smother!" he exclaimed. "You said you could bear the crackling of fire. I hear nothing of the kind, and it may be all the fire is in an imperfect furnace, which sends up smoke, as well as heat. Here! Help me with this carpet, and we will see if anything can be done."

The carpet was quickly torn up and banked against the register, but the plan was not wholly successful. The rapid influx of smoke was checked, but more or less constantly sifted in, adding to the quantity already there.

Flippy Jim coughed and sneezed, and fell to weeping in an absurd fashion.

"We are dead men!" he asserted. "Oh! I know we are, an' we ain't fit ter die. We came here as burglars—"

"Perhaps you did, but not I!"

"An' that's an awful crime. We sha'n't never be forgive, an' now we've gotter di-i-i-e!"

The last word was prolonged to a screech, and Flippy Jim—"flippy" no longer—flung himself on the floor and clawed around frantically with his dirty hands.

Once more Randolph fiercely attacked the door; once more he failed. It was of heavy material, and not a joint seemed strained by his exertions.

They were in a veritable death-trap!

He could not doubt that their misfortunes were owing to more than chance. The fastened door and the in-coming smoke all proved that human cunning was working against them, and, naturally, he arrived at the conclusion that foes were outside laughing at their dilemma. Perhaps Cheslington was one of them.

The air was almost unendurable, and he, too, dropped to the floor, in order to avoid being suffocated. And while both were so helpless, the smoke still sifted in, and, finding no outlet, hung over them like a funeral pall.

CHAPTER XV.

JACK TAKES A HAND.

WHEN Mosquito Jack entered the old building, he found that he was not to be a participant in the secret quest unless he made himself more forward than he intended. He was just in time to hear the office-door locked behind Randolph and Flippy Jim, and when he went out on the fire-escape, the iron shutters again baffled him. He returned to the club-room.

"May as well halt an' take things easy," he muttered, as he sat down in the easiest chair. "Dunno as I keer much 'cause I ain't in it, fer ef Peter Woods prefers Mr. Jim Flip fer a pard, why, he kin hev him. Birds of a feather flock tergether, I've heerd. Why should the spirit o' mortal be proud! But I'll stay here an', when Peter comes out, let him see that my name ain't Dennis K. Mud so much ez he thinks fer!"

This plan comforted the Hustler Gamin for awhile, but he soon grew ambitious. He had his opinion of the old building and those who occupied it, and realized that a better time to explore never would come.

Like Randolph, he had a keen realization of the fact that he did not belong on other people's property, but he also remembered the harsh treatment he had received at Everard Cheslington's hands, and felt that he had a right to baffle a crook, if he could.

Anyhow, he was now started on the venture, and might as well make a thorough job of it.

There was but one room on that floor which he never had explored, and he set out to see what it was like. Entering, he found a table in the center, with an abundance of chairs around the side, and was wise enough to suspect that it was a committee, or directors' room.

At the further side was another door. He opened it and saw a stairway beyond. Securing a lamp he went up boldly.

He had not expected any great discovery there, but had barely paused at the head of the stairs, to look around, when a peculiar sound broke in on the silence.

"Ebenezer!" he ejaculated. "What's that? Didn't know I's in a telegraph office, but ef that ain't a telegram masheen, I ain't no ear fer music."

Advancing toward the sound he found a little table in one corner, and to the table was affixed a genuine "telegram masheen." He had seen enough of them before to be sure that it presented no variation, and it was ticking and clicking away merrily. Its presence there was truly surprising.

"What in the world hev I found in this old garret?" Mosquito Jack exclaimed in wonder.

The instrument clicked on calmly.

"Ebenezer Augustus! but don't I wish I could read them ticks! Great pity my eddification hez been so neglected, fer I need knowledge now more than a cat needs two tails. A telegram masheen up here? Say, w'ot does it mean, anyhow?"

No wonder he was puzzled. The room was the uppermost in the house, and a very inconvenient place for a telegraph office. But it was not that, nor was any railroad office near. Jack could see no possible use for the little instrument.

"What be you sayin' anyhow?" he wondered, and spoke the words aloud. "Click, click, clickety-click! All them sounds mean somethin', but I couldn't tell one on 'em ef I's ter, be made president fer doin' it."

He punched the machine with his finger, and then eyed the wire which descended from the roof and then rose again.

"Some o' Cheslington's funny biz, I'll bet!" he finally decided. "He don't git his livin' like an honest man, an' it's in the course of events that he should hev queer contrivances. Reckon Peter Woods may want ter see this joker afore he leaves. I'll go down an' head him off as he goes out. Yes, by Ebenezer! I guess I will, or I may get locked in fer the night!"

He descended quickly to the committee room, and shoved the hall door ajar. He did not open it wholly, for there was that revealed to his gaze which made him draw it to again suddenly.

"Cheslington!" he muttered, with a start. "Cheslington an' other men!"

It was not strange that the boy was alarmed. He had an opinion of his own in regard to Everard, and believed that man would not hesitate to commit any dark deed. His presence in the building at that time was ominous.

After a short while the Hustler Gamin's coolness returned in a measure, and he cautiously opened the door a little. Once more he had plain view of the men. They were standing within a few feet of the office door, and Cheslington was talking rapidly to his companions. His voice was so much lowered that Jack could hear nothing, and great secrecy was being observed; but the spy did not fail to notice the gestures toward the office door.

"Ebenezer Augustus! but ain't Peter in a fix, now! Ches is on ter the racket, an' he's got Peter caged. When my rash young frien' comes out Ches will sort o' eat him up as a cat does a mouse. Peter, you'd better took John Jay Marsh along with yer, an' set him at the outside door as a guard!"

Jack's keenest sympathies were aroused. He did not believe his own proximity was suspected, but "Peter" and Flippy Jim were in a fix. For the time being they were caged; when they came out, Cheslington would have them at his mercy.

The Hustler Gamin tried to think of a way by which he could warn his friend, but in vain.

"Best thing I kin do is ter get out, myself," he decided, "but I don't see how I am ter do it. Unless I kin reach the roof, I'm erbout as fast penned up as Peter is. I'll see w'ot kin be done."

He returned to the attic. There was one window, and it was closed up with the same kind of iron shutters he had seen below. When he tried to open them he found them equally hard to move. Cheslington had shut his guilty secrets in well.

There was a skylight in the roof, but at such a point that he felt little hope of reaching it. He decided to have another look at the enemy before trying, and again descended to the committee room. Cheslington and his allies were still there, and their manner was one of dogged resolution.

"They can't stand the smoke a great while," Everard was saying.

"Suppose the scheme don't work?" inquired a second man, whom Jack recognized as Johnson, of the horse-racing combination. "The pipe was made to convey heat, not smoke—"

"I have it fixed so smoke will come. Don't fear!"

"It's a bit rough on them."

"Why did they meddle with our business?"

"Of course they've brought it on themselves."

"That is it exactly. We must either take prompt steps or throw up the snap we have had so long. Bertram Dalton is weakening and liable to peach at any moment; we want one or two more good financial deals before our ship goes down. Just let an important message go over the wire and I'll sock it to old man Fenton for every dollar I can get out of him."

"But how am I to wind up in a blaze of glory?" lugubriously asked Johnson.

"You have played the races immensely to your profit, and ought to be well fixed. As you intimate, it's the off season with you now, but you can't expect the earth. Anyhow, you won't get it. Affairs are drawing to a crisis; Colonel Fenton has driven out an innocent son, only to find that losses continue, and the train can't run much beyond the end of the track."

"Is what little we are henceforth to get worth the deed we are now doing?"

"Those men," Cheslington replied, pointing to the office, "came here as spies, and of all things on earth a spy is the most despicable—"

"We, and all other knaves, think so," laughed Johnson. "The man who howls against spies is never living on the square."

"That's about so, but never mind; I don't allow any one to tread on my toes with impunity. Those men tried it, and you see the result. I've turned on the smoke; their room is full of it by this time; and they will smother like animals in their dens."

Mosquito Jack's hair seemed rising when he heard this plain statement of the case.

"In a few minutes all will be over," Everard added.

The Hustler Gamin turned and ran up the stairs.

"All will be over, will it?" he muttered. "Not ef I kin help it! Got a p'izon scheme ter make Peter an' Jim inter smoked pork, hev they? Ebenezer Augustus! but there must be some hustlin' done here! Move-on Mike an' his club is wanted, an' wanted bad. Up the roof I go!"

He glanced at the skylight, and then lay hold of the timbers of the unfinished attic, and essayed to climb up to the window. For several moments he managed to progress favorably, but, finally, his hand slipped, and he fell heavily back to the floor.

CHAPTER XVI.

LEADING THE ATTACK.

MOSQUITO JACK was considerably shaken bodily by his fall, but his courage remained unimpaired. He leaped up at once.

"That's one fer you," he acknowledged, "but it takes three falls ter win a match. Here's at yer, ag'in!"

Once more he climbed, and with less speed and more care than on the former occasion. He was strong and agile, and perseverance took him to the skylight, at last. He broke the sash and glass with his foot, secured a hold above, and, after a struggle, drew himself up to the roof. He felt the effects of his efforts, but did not dare to pause. Gaining his feet he started on, but almost instantly tripped and fell.

"Ebenezer Augustus!" he exclaimed, "I'm gettin' so I tumble around like a baby. Lost erbout all faith in myself, by gum! Hullo! what's this? A wire, an' that's what tripped me. Part o' Everard's telegraph system, an'—say, what's this?"

A telegraph wire crossed the roof of the house, but was broken in a way which impressed the Hustler Gamin as peculiar. An elbow of the wire descended through the roof, and then rose again to resume its old course.

When he saw the instrument in the attic a vague suspicion had finally dawned upon him, and it now received fresh force.

"Wire-tappers!" he uttered. "That's w'ot Everard's secret biz is. An honest wire happened ter cross this roof, an' Ches made dishonest connections with it. Yes, sirree! I'll bet a hat I hev the key ter the racket. By his little scheme he gets all messages ahead o' them fer whom they're intended. No wonder he an' Johnson hev been makin' money out o' the races, an' other things. Everard, I'm onto you, an' there will soon be a sizzlin' o' hurt meat on the gridiron. Wire-tappin', is it? Ebenezer! but won't Officer Mike's drag-net jest about scoop them rascals!"

Jack could not pause to dwell upon this discovery, and he hurried to the fire-escape.

He had felt but little hope of being able to reach that means of escape, but the fact that the upper window was so near made it possible to drop to the upper balcony. It was a hazardous plan, but he did not hesitate.

Carefully he lowered himself over the eaves, hung at arm's-length, and then dropped. There was a moment of anxious suspense, and then he alighted in safety. Without pausing he scrambled down the ladder.

When he passed the shutter-closed window of the office he not only smelled smoke but heard pounding within. Knowing he could give no help he did not pause, but continued his descent and was soon in the yard.

Once there he took the same course he and Randolph had pursued on a former occasion, reached the alley and hastened to the street.

Almost the first person he saw was Officer O'Dowley.

"Say!" he cried, seizing the patrolman by the sleeve, "you want ter hustle! Peter is bein' cremated in thar!"

"St. Patrick! phat's that you say?" demanded the guardian of the night.

"Everard has got Peter an' another feller shut in a room, an' is smotherin' them with smoke."

"Where'd he buy de cigars?"

"Say, can't you understand? It ain't cigars, but assassination, by gum! Mebbe they've set fire ter ther house; I dunno, but this much is sartin: Peter is pris'ner, an' Everard has let on smoke ter do him up."

"Murthuration! an Oi sthanding oidle here? Begorra, here's de chance for action, an' if Oi don't hev them crooks in me drag-net, me name ain't Michael Patrick O'Dowley! Oi have no saloon pull, an' don't drink; but the Goddess ave Liberty an' de Constitution is me pole-star ave loight. Come on, John, an' if this noight don't make a sergeant ave me, Oi'll not have me deserts. Come on!"

While talking Move-on Mike was hurrying toward the door, which he now reached.

"Oi'll demand admittance in the name ave the Goddess of—"

"Smash it in, Mike! That's the Goddess you want ter rely on," Jack advised.

"Maybe you's roight, John, an' Oi'll do it."

The patrolman looked doubtfully at the heavy door, but suddenly saw his way clear. The street was being repaired in front of the building, and several up-torn paving-stones lay in a pile. One of these he secured, and, swinging it aloft, buried it against the place where the lock was located. The door flew open.

"Hurry!" the Hustler Gamin urged. "Peter may be drawin' his last breath."

"Begorra, Oi'll see that he kapes on br'athin' for tin years after the last one is drawed."

Officer O'Dowley ran up the stairs with agility which put Jack on his mettle to follow by his side. Then they flung open the door of the club.

Cheslington and three other men were there.

Up to this time it had not occurred to Mosquito Jack that they were daring ominously strong odds. Realization of the fact came now and he felt troubled, but the gallant patrolman was not in the least alarmed.

"Surrender, wan an' all!" he commanded, waving his stick. "Oi arrest you in the name ave the Goddess ave Liberty an' the Constitution, an' don't divil a wan ave yez dare to lift his hand. You hear me?"

Cheslington tried to look innocent.

"What joke are you springing on us, officer?" he asked.

"Joke!" echoed Michael, fiercely. "Joke, is it? Begorra, ef tin years in Sing Sing is a joke, dat's de kind ave a mad-dog dis joke is. Open dat door!"

He pointed to the office.

"Really, Mr. O'Dowley—"

"Open dat door!" thundered Move-on Mike.

"Really, I shall complain of your conduct—"

With heavy steps Michael crossed the floor, making straight for the door, but Cheslington barred the way and put up his hands scientifically.

"Go for him, boys!" the crook cried to his allies.

Move-on Mike uttered a roar and struck two blows. The first beat down Everard's guard, and almost broke his arm; the second dropped the fellow, half-stunned, to the floor. By that time, however, the other men had recovered their wits, and they set upon the officer together.

Jack felt that he was wanted in two places at the same time, but could not be oblivious to the fact that "Peter Woods" might even then be breathing his last in the smoke-filled room.

The crooks had strongly secured the door, but in such a way that any one could open it from that side. Jack began to scatter the impediments, working with zeal. All the while he could hear Move-on Mike fighting his battle, but dared not stop.

At last the way was clear.

He flung the door open.

A cloud of smoke rushed out.

He was almost blinded, but promptly dashed into the death-trap. He stumbled over something and almost fell. It was the prostrate form of a man, and he seized and dragged it from the room. It was Flippy Jim. He turned back, but had only reached the threshold when another man appeared, crawling like a snake.

"Peter!" shouted the Hunter Gamin, joyfully, and he seized upon his friend and aided him to where the air was pure.

Then he reclosed the door and turned to see how Move-on Mike was progressing.

Michael was all right. Two of his late opponents were prostrate and insensible, and the other two were subdued. They were on their feet, but, plainly, much the worse for having got in the way of his potent stick. The gallant officer was breathing heavily.

"Begorra!" he exclaimed, "dis is wan ave the most interesting experiences Oi've had in six months. If you's have anny more ave the kind around here Oi'd thank you to trot thim out so Oi kin limber up me joints a bit more!"

"I've got Peter out," observed Jack.

"Oi had me eyes on yez all dhe toime. Will ye—Hullo! here's de roundsman!"

Another officer had walked in. When passing the building, the open, broken door had arrested his attention, and he had come to learn the cause of it.

"Here we are!" airily remarked Officer O'Dowley. "Four ave de biggest crooks in New York, an' all bagged an' ready for Sing Sing market. You kin take your pick, sor, but Oi ask for me due credit."

Randolph appeared, staggering, but looking like anything but a dead man.

"I desire those men arrested for attempted murder!" he declared.

"Sure, an' they shall be arristed; yes, an' ivery wan shall be convicted an' sint up dhe river. Moind dat, now, an' begin ter repint already, ye skunks!"

The roundsman was some time in getting the facts of the case, but, when he did, he aided Mike in rendering Cheslington and his companions helpless. Then a complete examination was made of the building.

There was no more found in the office than Randolph had seen before, but, just when the hopes of the adult investigators went down, Mosquito Jack came to the rescue.

"I kin explain the whole game!" he declared.

"What was it?"

"They're wire-tappers. Got a telegram mashed up-stairs by which they cut off the messages as they go erlong, an' so make money on races, an' other things."

Randolph found the assertion intensely interesting, and he bade Jack lead the way to the instrument. This the boy did, and a general examination was soon made. It was found that Jack was right, and the business of the conspirators was made plain.

Fenton now had clew to the whole of his father's business troubles. Before, he had learned who made the troubles; now, he saw how it was done. No wonder the wire-tappers had been able to forestall the colonel's projected moves when they secured the points before he did. He had been using a semi-private wire, as Randolph well knew, and it was clear that the wire they saw was the same one.

At last, the way was clear for the young man to prove his innocence of all charges of treachery.

Relief had come to him and Flippy Jim just in time. They were still suffering from the effects of the smoke, but, probably, not injured permanently.

Move-on Mike pinched Jack's arm and whispered:

"Begorra! me drag-net has got thim, an' though you deserve most ave the credit, Oi think you'll see me a sergeant soon!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MEETING THE "DOUBLE."

"WITH my innocence established in one way, I intend to prove it in another, to-night!"

It was the day after the scenes last described, and Randolph Fenton sat in his own room as he made the remark to Mosquito Jack. Cheslington and his allies were in captivity, but, at Randolph's earnest request, the police had agreed not to make the arrest public until another day had passed. Randolph, too, had given Jack a history of the troubles which had made him an outcast from home, only withholding his real name.

"I reckon you're thinkin' o' Bertram Dalton," the Hustler Gamin replied.

"I am."

"You intend to nab him?"

"I shall be at the place where he promised to meet Lena, to-night. If he comes, I'll know who this double of mine is."

"Good! But you ought ter hev a perleece-man."

"I shall have one. Officer O'Dowley has asked for a night off, and will accompany me. Your look is one of eagerness. Do you want to go with us?"

"Bet your patent-leathers!"

"You shall go."

"Thank you! With yer innocence all proved, I s'pose you'll go back home."

"No!" replied Randolph, with emphasis. "My father wrongfully accused me and drove me away from home. The step was final, and no reconciliation can be had. I am going to fight my own way in life, and, after showing my father how he wronged me, bid him farewell forever!"

Mosquito Jack shook his head in grave disapproval of this decision, but did not try to combat it. Still, he hoped and believed a reconciliation would yet follow.

They waited patiently for the time to come when they could act their part, but were careful not to let Lena suspect their intentions. Despite the advice of the landlady, the young wife persisted in her determination to meet her recreant husband, and Randolph was glad it was so.

At the proper hour, Randolph, Jack and O'Dowley made their way to the Park, and, after a little conversation with one of the gray-coated guards, took a position where they could watch, but were themselves concealed by bushes. Fenton had been quite right in his assertion that the place was dark; nothing more favorable could be found.

They had expected to see one of two persons who were to meet—if, indeed, Dalton came—arrive before the other, and it was a surprise when, as evidence that they had met outside the Park entrance, Lena and a young man finally passed the gate, walking side by side, and moving toward those in ambush.

Jack touched Randolph's arm.

"There's yer 'double!'" he whispered.

There was no answer; the young man was speechless.

He saw the "double," but found him no stranger. Lena's companion was as familiar to "Peter" as his own right hand, and he could not have spoken a word.

He recognized his own brother, Wayland Fenton!

"Looks a heap loike yez!" Move-on Mike commented.

Still Randolph was speechless; he was dumfounded.

The young couple left the main walk and turned into the smaller, darker path. When near the ambushed men, Wayland paused.

"Let us not defer action, Lena," he began, abruptly. "I want this matter settled. Are you still so mad as to wish me to acknowledge you as my wife?"

"Bertram," was the quick reply, "I am your wife, and you are all I have in the world. I don't want to live unless we can be together."

"My treatment of you has been cruel, mean, infamous."

"There was a time in the past when it was all I could wish. I look forward to the future with hope."

"Suppose I am a criminal?"

"You would still be my husband!"

"Lena," Wayland cried, "I don't deserve such a woman as you, and, for your own sake, I am sorry you ever knew me. If you loathed me, hated me, knew me as I do myself; if you knew how infamous I am—"

"But, Bertram—"

"Listen, and you shall know all. I am not Bertram Dalton; my name is Wayland Fenton. I am of a family rich and—well, all but me are honorable. I met you; loved and married you. But the most ignoble kind of pride stood in my way. You were poor; the curse of riches was upon me, and I would not present you to the world as my wife. I had married you under a false name, and when I saw fit to desert you, you had no clew to my identity. One thing let me say right here: I did not desert you because I was tired of you, but, lacking moral courage to do what was right, I saw no way out of the wretched muddle. Lena, how can you listen patiently while such a wretch tells his story?"

"Because I realize how hard it was for you."

"And you? Was the heavier burden on my shoulders or yours? But let that pass for now. You must know me as I am!"

"I am the younger son of Colonel Andrew Fenton, an honorable, noble man. I have a sister who is good; a brother whose heart knows no guile. I have been the black sheep of the flock. While posing at home as a model young man I have been wild and reckless, my position as traveling agent for my father enabled me to hide this fact, as I also hid the fact of our marriage."

"A year ago my worst, most infamous folly began. I had made the acquaintance of one Everard Cheslington, a man about town. He was, and is, a wretch, but I was long ignorant just how evil he was. In a moment of weakness I told him of my father's business, and the guards thrown around it. I was too ambitious at that time. My father was getting rich; I was getting only a moderate salary."

"Cheslington made a proposal to me. It was that we put in a telegraph instrument, tap the private wire, and go into speculation on our own hook, on the strength of the private advices my father received."

"Fool that I was, I consented. The deed was done; the work begun. But how did it work? I had not thought I should injure father's business, but only make money side by side with him. Instead, I learned that every dollar we made was at father's expense. I implored Cheslington to give up the work. He laughed; said he had a good thing and should keep it; and added that I dared not go to Colonel Fenton and tell him the truth."

"He was right. Coward that I was, I dared not confess the truth; the work went on. But, I did not share in it. I withdrew, and Cheslington had it all to himself."

"The crisis came when my father, after vainly looking for explanation of his losses, erroneously decided that Randolph, my brother, must be guilty—Randolph, the noblest, most honorable of men. He was banished from the house, and I remained—I, the vilest of all wretches!"

"I tried to find Cheslington, but failed. Once, I went to Mrs. Brown's boarding-house, knowing he used to visit a friend there—I was admitted by a lodger, who was too indifferent to care whom he was letting in. It was then I met you, as you will remember."

"Twice I have called at Cheslington's own boarding-house, but have always been told he was out.

"Lena, you know my full infamy. To-morrow morning I shall tell the whole wretched story to father, and then go away forever, to be an exile, penniless, disgraced, hopeless. Can you, dare you risk your fortunes with such a creature?"

Wayland had spoken rapidly and vehemently, his voice often falling, however, to a tremulous pitch. That remorse was strong within him no one could doubt, and Lena's devotion did not waver.

"My husband," she answered, "if you have sinned, you have suffered. I believe in you still, and if you will allow it, my place shall be by your side while our lives last. Whither thou goest, I will go!"

"You shall, Lena!" he exclaimed, "and may I prove a different man in the future. In twenty-four hours the new life shall begin. My crimes will make me an exile from father, sister, brother and home; your forgiveness will be the light of hope to my path, my brave little wife!"

Randolph Fenton stepped from cover.

"Brother!" he spoke, simply.

Wayland recoiled.

"You here!"

"Yes, brother; and here to say that I have heard all. More, I shall intercede with our father for a repentant son. I, too, have been meditating exile, but I grow wiser. Let us leave all to the future."

Move-on Mike took Mosquito Jack by the arm.

"Come, lad," directed the honest policeman; "our place ain't here. Leave the brothers to patch it up."

"Ebenezer Augustus! who'd hev thought this?"

"Begorra, it's odd our fri'nd niver suspected who his double was."

"Prob'ly he placed too much confidence in him."

Jack's surmise partially covered the ground, but there was more to it. Randolph and Wayland looked alike, and strangers thought the resemblance remarkable, but those who daily saw both could not see the likeness as others did. When hunting for his double, Randolph thought of his own brother.

"I've a notion it'll all end well," declared Mike. "O! hope so, for the Goddess ave Liberty an' the Constitution would be hurt bad if a family was broke up out ave the trouble."

"Correct, by Ebenezer!"

Two days later Randolph resumed his place in his father's office, and announcement was made of Wayland's marriage. The friends of the Fentons never knew that any trouble had occurred, and the reconciliation was complete. The colonel was only too glad to give Wayland a chance to repent, for he had a strong dose of repentance to take, himself.

All is now happiness in the family; Randolph is again trusted and happy; Wayland and Lena make a devoted couple, their friends say.

Cheslington and his allies were tried and sent to prison on outside charges easy to find, but, as a reward for Everard's silence covering Wayland, all his crimes known to this story were allowed to rest.

Officer O'Dowley won much honor, and considerable money from Colonel Fenton; and the temporary failure to be appointed sergeant did not worry him so very much. He and Mosquito Jack resumed their old life, waiting, perhaps, for fresh adventures by which they could win renown. Jack, already, was a hero.

THE END.

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